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Mkts settle higher in volatile trade; metal shares shine

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SPORTS

Carlos Alcaraz, Iga Swiatek win titles at Indian Wells

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سالار روزنامہ بنگلور

Website: salarnews.in www.magzter.com 19 MARCH 2024 | TUESDAY | BENGALURU | 9 RAMADAN, 1445 AH Vol 4 | Issue No 62 | Pages: 8

SC asks SBI to disclose all data on electoral bonds by 21 March

SC raps SBI for not revealing bond nos which will link donors to parties

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

In a third tongue-lashing to State Bank of India, Supreme Court on Monday told it to stop being "selective" and make "complete disclosure" of all details related to the electoral bonds scheme by 21 March.

It said the details to be disclosed include the unique bond numbers that would reveal the link between the buyers and the recipient political parties.

A five-judge Constitution bench of Chief Justice of India DY Chandrachud and Justices Sanjiv Khanna, BR Gavai, JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra asked SBI's Chairman to file a compliance affidavit 5 pm of March 21.

The Chairman has to file affidavit indicating that SBI has disclosed all details of electoral bonds which were in its possession and custody and no details have been withheld, the court said.

Supreme Court asked SBI's Chairman to file a compliance affidavit by 5pm on Thursday **PHOTO: PTI**

It further asked Election Commission of India to upload the details on its website forthwith upon receipt of information from the SBI.

In a landmark verdict, a five-judge constitution bench had done away with the scheme, calling it "unconstitutional", and ordered disclosure by Election Commission of donors, the amount donated by them and the recipients by 13 March.

The bench refused a hearing on unlisted pleas of industry bodies, Associated Chambers of Commerce & Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in the case. The industry bodies, through senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, wanted an urgent hearing on their interim application against the disclosure of bond details.

Senior advocate Harish Salve told the bench it should not seem that the bank is "playing with" the court.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for the petitioner NGO in the case, claimed that major political parties have not given the donor details and only some parties have given it.

"There is enough assistance by public-spirited citizens," Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said, claiming that these sponsored NGOs are "fudging figures".

The apex court also refused to take note of a letter by senior advocate Adish C Aggarwala, the president of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), seeking a suo motu review of the judgment on disclosure of electoral bond details.

"Apart from being a senior counsel, you are president of SCBA. You know the procedure," CJI Chandrachud said, adding, "You have written a letter asking me to invoke my suo motu jurisdiction. These are all publicity-oriented stunts. Do not make me say anything more. It will be distasteful," he told Aggarwala.

As an institution, our shoulders are "broad enough", Supreme Court as the Mehta flagged social media posts against the court intended to embarrass it after its orders in Electoral Bonds cases.

—PTI

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Act against Viksit Bharat WhatsApp text: Oppn to EC

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Raising the issue of people receiving Prime Minister Narendra Modi's letter on WhatsApp seeking support in building a 'Viksit Bharat', opposition leaders on Monday called on the Election Commission to act against what they said was a "blatant violation" of the model code of conduct. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor tagged a post of a person raising the issue of privacy over the prime minister's letter being received by people living abroad. Congress MP Manish Tewari also posted on X the WhatsApp message which had the letter attached, as received by him on his phone. "Where did the ministry get my mobile number from? Which database are they unauthorisedly accessing?" he said. TMC MP Saket Gokhale alleged that the people around the world, who visited the country, have been spammed with the Whatsapp message. *—PTI*

U'khand Muslims forced to close shops after girls' abduction

PITHORAGARH, 18 MARCH

A local traders' body has forced Muslim shopkeepers in Dharchula to down shutters and given a call for their ouster from the Uttarakhand town after two minor girls were allegedly lured by a couple of men from Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh. The Dharchula Vyapar Sangh has cancelled the membership of 91 traders, mostly Muslims, and its members have stopped them from opening their shops over the past three days. They have also asked landlords to oust such "outsiders". But the administration said landlords in the town, about 90km from district headquarter Pithoragarh, have not supported the trader organisation's call. The two traders from Bareilly, who were arrested in February for allegedly luring the minor girls, were charged under IPC sections of 363 (kidnapping), 376 (sexual assault), 354 (use of criminal force to outrage modesty of woman) and POCSO Act, Dharchula SHO Parvez Ali said. "We have registered an FIR against elements who forced the shop owners to shut their shops," Pithoragarh District Magistrate Reena Joshi said. Dharchula SDM Manjit Singh said the traders whose membership has been cancelled are being provided full security by the district administration. *—PTI*

'NARI SHAKTI PLUNDERED'

PM attacks RaGa over 'destroying Shakti' remark

Narendra Modi being garlanded during an election rally ahead of Lok Sabha polls, in Shivamogga on Monday **PHOTO: PTI**

SHIVAMOGGA, 18 MARCH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday launched a scathing attack on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi over his "Shakti" remark, saying Opposition INDIA bloc was trying to destroy it.

At a public rally, Modi said, "Yesterday in Mumbai Shivaji Ground (park), INDI Alliance announced that they want to destroy Shakti'. If they want to destroy Shakti', then worshipping Shakti' is our resolve."

Gandhi had said at Shivaji Park in Mumbai after the conclusion of his 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra': "Our fight against Modi is not on a personal level. Modi is a mask' who works for a shakti' (power). He is a shallow man who doesn't have a 56-inch chest."

Underlining that every woman in the country is a reflection of Shakti', the feminine form of God, Modi said his government always gave preference to 'Nari Shakti' or women's power'.

"When Chandrayaan-3 reached where no one had ever reached before (lunar South Pole), we gave that place the name Shiv-Shakti Point'," Modi noted.

Modi quoted political experts as saying that Nari Shakti' is his silent voter. "But for me, Nari Shakti is not a voter, but Ma Shakti Swaroopa," he said. Modi took a dig at Congress government for allegedly "plundering" Karnataka and turning the state into their ATM.

Modi claimed that corruption has gone up so much in the State that there is no money to run even the government.

Modi targeted Congress Bengaluru rural candidate and three-time MP DK Suresh over his "separate nation" remarks

Giving a call for Ee Baari, Naanooru Meeri' (Cross 400 this time) in Kannada, he told the crowd that BJP and its ally JD(S) needed to win in all the Lok Sabha seats.

The general elections in Karnataka will be held in two phases on 26 April and 7 May. *—PTI*

EC removes WB DGP, 6 states' Home Secretaries

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Ahead of the ensuing Lok Sabha polls, the Election Commission of India (ECI) on Monday issued orders for the removal of West Bengal's Director General of Police Rajeev along with some other senior officials from various states.

The ECI has also ordered the removal of certain key officials of six states in what it termed a decisive move towards upholding the principles of free, fair and transparent elections.

Home Secretaries in six states-namely Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have been asked to step down. Additionally, the secretaries of the General Administrative Department in Mizoram and Himachal Pradesh have been removed.

The DGP had been in the spotlight after the BJP and other opposition parties criticised the Bengal police for alleged inaction in giving justice to the victims of Sandeshkhali.

The Sandeshkhali area had been witnessing unrest after women protestors sought justice against alleged atrocities committed by Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Sheikh Shahjahan and his aides.

PHOTO: PTI

Meanwhile, the Election commission also directed all the State governments to transfer officers connected with election-related work, who have completed three years or are in their home districts.

Maharashtra had not complied with the directions in respect of few Municipal Commissioners and some Additional / Deputy Municipal Commissioners.

While conveying displeasure to the Chief Secretary, the Commission directed the transfer of Brihan mumbai Municipal Corporation Commissioner and the additional / Deputy commissioners with the direction to report by 6pm on Monday.

This step comes as part of the Commission's commitment to maintaining a level playing field and ensuring the integrity of the electoral process.

—ANI

PASHUPATI PARAS REBUFFED

In Bihar, BJP to contest 17, JD(U) 16 & Chirag's LJP 5

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

NDA on Monday finalised its seat-sharing formula in Bihar for Lok Sabha elections, announcing BJP will contest 17 constituencies, JD(U) 16 and Chirag Paswan's LJP (Ram Vilas) five, while rebuffing the claims of LJP faction led by Union minister Pashupati Kumar Paras.

Two other NDA allies -- Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) and Upendra Kushwaha-led Rashtriya Lok Morcha -- will contest one seat each, Vinod Tawde, BJP's in-charge for elections in Bihar, told a press conference at BJP headquarters.

This will be the first time BJP has got more seats than Chief Minister Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) in Bihar, underscoring the change in their equations after they joined hands a few months back. It had bagged 39 seats in 2019. Bihar LJP (Ram Vilas) chief Raju Tiwari said Chirag Paswan will contest the Hajipur Lok Sabha seat, which has been given to the party under the pact for the 2024 polls. *—PTIv*

BJP National President with Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) National President Chirag Paswan during a meeting **PHOTO: PTI**

T'gana Guv quits, may contest polls

CHENNAI, 18 MARCH

Tamilisai Soundararajan said on Monday that she had tendered her resignation as Governor of Telangana of her own volition and that she wanted to involve herself in intense public service.

Speaking to reporters at the airport here hours after Telangana Raj Bhavan announced that she had tendered her resignation, Soundararajan said there "was no pressure to do so (quit)." She underlined that she enjoyed her days in the gubernatorial post as a "people's governor."

She has also resigned as Lieutenant Governor (LG) of Puducherry.

"No, there was no pressure (to quit)," she said.

She said she had quit the "luxurious life" of a governor and said, "People will understand my love."

Asked what her next course of action would be in the wake of speculations that she might contest the 19 April Lok Sabha polls from Tamil Nadu, she said she would spell out her plans later. *—PTI*

SATYENDAR JAIN BACK IN TIHAR AFTER 9 MONTHS AS SC REJECTS BAIL PLEA

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Former Delhi health minister and AAP leader Satyendar Jain returned to Tihar Jail on Monday, hours after the Supreme Court dismissed his regular bail plea in a money laundering case.

"Jain arrived at Tihar jail in the evening. The formal procedure of lodging him in the prison is on," a jail official said.

Jain left his Saraswati Vihar residence in north-west Delhi around 6 pm to surrender at the jail.

The top court rejected an oral request by Jain's counsel to allow him to surrender in a week's time.

The SC had on 17 January reserved its verdict on his regular bail plea.

The top court had granted interim bail to Jain on 26 May, 2023 on medical grounds, and it was extended from time to time.

Jain has moved the apex court challenging the 6 April, 2023 order of the Delhi High Court dismissing his regular bail application in the case.

The ED had arrested the AAP leader on 30 May, 2022 on the charge of laundering money through four companies allegedly linked to him. *— PTI*

HOTTER WINTERS

Study shows evidence of 'missing' spring

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

An analysis of temperature data since 1970 shows that winters are quickly transitioning to summer-like conditions in North India, shortening the spring season.

Researchers at the US-based Climate Central, an independent group of scientists, conducted this analysis to place India within the context of global warming trends, focusing on the winter months (December-February).

The analysis revealed abrupt changes in temperature occurring in late winter across north India.

The average temperatures in states in north India showed either a cooling trend or slight warming in January, followed by strong warming in February.

This indicates that these regions are now experiencing abrupt transitions from cool winter-like temperatures to much warmer conditions traditionally observed in March, the researchers said.

The analysis revealed abrupt changes in temperature occurring in late winter across north India **PHOTO: PTI**

To show this change, the researchers calculated the difference between the warming rates in January and February, expressed as the change in average temperature since 1970.

The most significant jump in warming rates was observed in Rajasthan, where the average temperature in February was 2.6 degrees Celsius higher than in January.

A total of nine states and Union territories, including Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, and Uttarakhand, showed a January-February difference of more than 2 degrees Celsius.

This supports the reports that it feels like spring has disappeared in many parts of India, the researchers said. The analysis also suggested that winter, overall, is warming across India, with every region showing a net warming trend during winter.

"The cooling in the central and northern Indian states during January followed by very strong warming in February creates the potential for a quick jump from winter to spring-like conditions," said Andrew Pershing, VP for Science at Climate Central.

—PTI

Narendra Modi said he is looking forward to further strengthening the time-tested ties between the two countries **PHOTO: PTI**

PM congratulates Putin on poll win

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday congratulated Russian President Vladimir Putin on his re-election to the top office and said that he is looking forward to further strengthening the "time-tested" ties between the two countries. "Warm congratulations to HE Vladimir Putin on his re-election as President of Russian Federation," Modi said in a post on 'X'. "Look forward to working together to further strengthen the time-tested Special & Privileged Strategic Partnership between India and Russia in the years to come," he said. Reports from Moscow said Putin won a historic fifth term as Russian President in a landslide victory. *—PTI*

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UKRAINE EAM DMYTRO KULEBA TO VISIT INDIA

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Ukrainian foreign minister Dmytro Kuleba is likely to pay a brief visit to India later this month, in his first trip to the country after the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict over two years back.

The visit is in the process of being finalised and if everything goes according to plan, Kuleba will be in New Delhi by the end of March, people familiar with the matter said. Kuleba is set to hold wide-ranging talks with his Indian counterpart S Jaishankar besides meeting several senior officials.

Kuleba is expected to seek India's support for a peace summit that is being planned in Switzerland within the next couple of months. Kuleba and Jaishankar are expected to co-chair a meet. *—PTI*

8 suspected Naxals spotted near Madikeri

MADIKERI, 18 MARCH

Over eight suspected Naxals were spotted near the Koojimale Rubber Estate near the border area of Sullia -Madikeri taluk. According to sources, they were spotted purchasing groceries from a shop in Kalmukaru, Koojimale, on Saturday. Law enforcement has started combing operations in the area. The Koojimale Rubber Estate spans the regions of Guttigar, Kollamogru, and Kalmakaru in Sullia. This isn't the first instance of Naxal activity in the region. In 2012, Naxals were sighted in Kaluru village, and more recently, in February 2018, their presence was reported in the Sampaje Hill vicinity. With the Lok Sabha elections, the resurgence of Naxal movements in the border areas of Kodagu has become a recurring phenomenon. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: SALAR

Simha, Yaduveer put up a show of unity in Mysuru

MYSURU, 18 MARCH

Mysuru MP Pratap Simha who has been replaced by Yaduveer Krishnadatta Chamaraja Wadiyar as the BJP's Mysuru-Kodagu Lok Sabha constituency candidate has affirmed his loyalty to the party. Simha and Yaduveer met on Monday and put up a show of unity. "BJP has entrusted me with the responsibility of serving as an MP for 10 years. I will not betray the trust placed in me by the party and the people," said Simha. Simha congratulated Yaduveer and called for unity within the party. When questioned about potential offers from other political parties, Simha reiterated his allegiance to the BJP and said he aims to work for Yaduveer's victory. Meanwhile, Yaduveer thanked the people for the reception and reassured the public that all legal matters concerning the palace property would be handled by his mother Pramoda Devi Wadiyar.
—Salar News

Child marriage victim from Bihar dies by suicide

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

A minor girl, who was a victim of child marriage from Bihar, died by suicide here, officials, said. The victim, Neelam Kumari, had ended her life on 13 March near Hebbagodi in the outskirts of the City. Her husband Vishal Kumar Sahani, also from Bihar, was arrested for marrying the minor and abetting her suicide. Police said Sahani had come to Bengaluru from Bihar a year ago and worked as a painter. He married Kumari in February, 2023 and brought her to Bengaluru 20 days ago. The police suspected that the accused had allegedly started having physical intimacy with the victim against her will which caused her mental stress.
—Salar News

Pilgrims restricted to one Umrah during Ramzan

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Haj and Umrah has announced that pilgrims are not allowed to repeat Umrah during the current holy month of Ramzan. It aims to reduce overcrowding According to diplomatic sources at the Indian Embassy in Riyadh, the ministry said that the permits for two or more Umrah pilgrimages will not be issued during the holy month. Visitors can use the Nusuk App to obtain a permit to perform Umrah. It directed pilgrims to follow the date and timing as there is no possibility of changingit . If a pilgrim wants to make changes, they must cancel their permit and apply again. If a pilgrim tries to obtain a permit for a second Umrah, the message reads, "The permit issuance fails."*—Salar News*

JD(S) indicates displeasure over seat-sharing with BJP

Meeting of JD(S) members, sitting and former MLAs was held on Monday

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

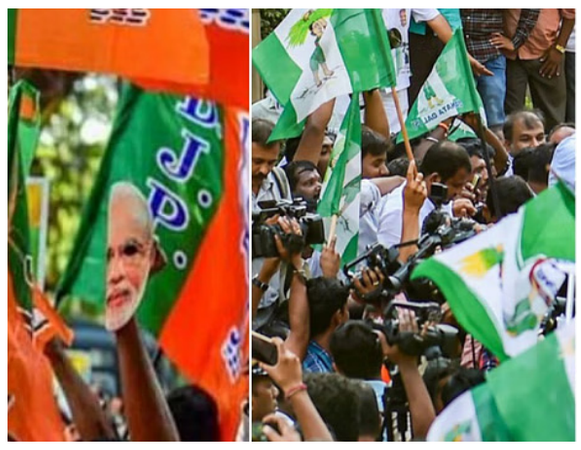
Amid reports that BJP would give its ally JD(S) only two seats in the State for the Lok Sabha election, the regional party's State President HD Kumaraswamy expressed unhappiness about it on Monday and said he has faith that his party would be given three-to-four seats.

He said his party leaders have asked him to communicate to BJP leadership the need to treat the JD(S) "respectfully" and make them understand its strength in at least 18 Lok Sabha segments.

"I will not speak until there is an official announcement. I have not asked for six or seven seats. Since the day discussions began between both of us, we have asked for three-to-four seats," Kumaraswamy said in response to a question about reports that the BJP may allot just two seats to the JD(S).

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, he said BJP knows the strength of the JD(S), and he has faith that they will give three-to-four seats to his party.

JD(S) is to contest in three seats, Mandya, Hassan and Kolar, and as per the agreement between both parties, noted cardiac surgeon and Deve Gowda's son-in-law Dr CN Manjunath has been fielded from Bangalore Rural on a BJP ticket.



BJP is not ready to allot the Kolar seat to the JD(S), which has irked the regional outfit *PHOTO: PTI*

However, according to some reports, BJP is not ready to allot the Kolar seat to the JD(S), which has irked the regional outfit.

According to sources, BJP-JD(S) alliance is not beneficial to the JD(S) in a big way, he said. "In 18 Lok Sabha segments, if the JD(S) votes swing in favour of BJP candidates, it will benefit BJP -- our efforts will benefit BJP."

The opinion of JD(S) leaders is that they expect the same cooperation from the BJP that they are extending to it, and that they have brought to his notice certain things to set right, the former chief minister said.

JD(S) is ahead of BJP in two-to-three Assembly constituencies in Bijapur (Vijayapura), and also in Kalaburagi, Kumara swamy said, "In such places, there should be a discussion with BJP high command on how to use our leaders. We should be treated respectfully; we discussed in the meeting what will be the consequences if we are neglected." By discussing all this with the BJP high command, it has been decided to frame programmes aimed at taking everyone together cordially and work unitedly, Kumara swamy said. *—PTI*

Biocon's Head clarifies on Electoral Bonds donations

Bengaluru, 18 March

In light of the Electoral Bonds controversy, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, the Executive Chairperson of Biocon Ltd, has clarified that the company did not make any political donations to any party. Taking to X, she said that any donations made were done on a personal level and with "white money." She said: "I purchased electoral bonds which I donated to JD(S) & several parties. My donations were nominal on the principle of funding election campaigns with white money." Responding to allegations that she donated a significant amount before the Karnataka Assembly elections, Mazumdar-Shaw refuted the claims and urged them reconsider their calculations. She added that these donations were not made with the expectation of receiving favours in return, but the donations made of her own free will. On 12 March the State Bank of India shared all details of electoral bonds with the Election Commission of India. —Salar News

BATTLING WATER WOES

Govt to set up panel to tackle water crisis

City is currently facing a shortage of 500 million litres per day of drinking water *PHOTO: PTI*

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The State government has decided to set up an expert committee on Monday to solve the persisting drinking water problem in the City.

"It has been decided to form an expert committee to solve the perennial problem of drinking water in the City. Drinking water should be used judiciously. Misuse of drinking water needs to be stopped," said Chief Minister Siddaramaiah while addressing a press conference.

Siddaramaiah held a meeting with Chief Secretary Rajneesh Goel, Additional Chief Secretary of Urban Development Department Rakesh Singh, BBMP Commissioner Tushar Girinath and BWSSB Chairman Ram Prasath Manohar.

The City is currently facing a shortage of 500 million litres per day (MLD) of drinking water said Siddaramaiah. "Bengaluru gets 1,470 MLD of water from Cauvery River and the rest is through the 14,000 borewells out of which 6,900 have gone dry. However, Bengaluru needs 2,600 MLD of water and nothing more can be pumped by Cauvery," he said.

Speaking about the arrangements made for drinking water, Siddaramaiah said, "We have collected enough water for drinking water in Cauveri and Kabini Rivers. We have collected enough water that should last till the end of June.There is 11.02 TMC water storage in KRS, 9.02 TMC in Kabini. We are also drilling new borewells at 313 places. 1200 inactive borewells will be revived."

CM attacks Modi

Siddaramaiah attacked Prime Minister Narendra Modi who was in Shivamogga for the Lok Sabha elections campaigning. Referring to the electoral bonds, Siddaramaiah said, "BJP government is the most corrupt government."
—Salar News

Assault over playing loud music, 3 held

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Three men were arrested on Monday for allegedly assaulting a shopkeeper over playing loud music during 'Azaan' here, police said.

The accused are all aged between 20 and 25 years. The incident occurred on Sunday evening at Siddannagalli in the Cubbonpet area which is within the limits of Halasuru Gate police station. It is said that the assault took place over playing 'Hanuman Chalisa'. However, police said they did not find any substantial proof to support the accusation and the complaint did not mention it.

In a viral video, a group of youth is seen confronting the shopkeeper over playing loud music leading to a heated argument between them with one of them grabbing the shopkeeper's collar. Though the victim tried to retaliate he was dragged out of the shop and was assaulted. According to police, the shopkeeper played a song on high volume during the time of Azaan, which irked the youth belonging to the minority community.

- In a viral video, a group of youth is seen confronting the shopkeeper over playing loud music leading to a heated argument between themwith one of them grabbing the shopkeeper's collar

"Based on the complaint, we have registered an FIR at Halasuru police station and have arrested three men in connection with the incident," a senior police officer said.

The FIR has been registered under 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation), 504 (intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of the peace), 149 (every member of unlawful assembly guilty of the offence committed in prosecution of common object), 307 (attempt to murder) of the Indian Penal Co.
—PTI

THE REBEL

Confident of resolving Eshwarappa issue: Vijayendra

SHIVAMOGGA, 18 MARCH

Amid a banner of revolt raised by senior BJP leader KS Eshwarappa, the party's President BY Vijayendra on Monday expressed confidence about the issue getting resolved. He said it was natural for aspirants to get upset about not getting the ticket to contest elections.

Acknowledging Eshwarappa's contribution in building and strengthening the BJP, he said the candidates for Lok Sabha polls were decided by the national leadership of the party.

Eshwarappa has announced he will contest as an independent candidate from Shivamogga seat in the coming Lok Sabha polls, blaming Vijayendra and his father and veteran BJP leader BS Yediyurappa for his son KE Kantesh being denied a party ticket from Haveri constituency. Former CM Basavaraj Bommai has got BJP's Haveri ticket.

Yediyurappa's son and sitting MP BY Raghavendra is a BJP candidate from Shivamogga. Eshwarappa, who is firm on contesting despite efforts by the party leaders to pacify him, has even decided to skip Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in Shivamogga on Monday.

Eshwarappa has claimed that his fight was to "save the party" in the state on behalf of 'hurt party workers' *PHOTO: PTI*

Stating that his brother Raghavendra has done good work as an MP, Vijayendra expressed confidence about his victory with a big margin.

Eshwarappa has alleged that the BJP in Karnataka is in the clutches of Yediyurappa, and has claimed that his fight was to "save the party" in the state on behalf of "hurt party workers".

Commenting on Eshwarappa's statement that several Hindutva leaders were being neglected by Yediyurappa and Vijayendra, the state BJP chief said, there are several Hindutva leaders in the BJP, and the party has the strength to take everything along. "We will do it."
—PTI

Mercury to soar over 35 °C

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

As the summer season approaches, Bengaluru residents are preparing themselves for another round of scorching heatwaves. The City has already experienced an unusually warm February, with temperatures exceeding normal averages, and now the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) The IMD predicts that temperatures could reach 35°C by the end of March, potentially climbing even higher in April.

This would be a significant increase compared to the usual April temperatures which are usually around 32-33 degrees Celsius. The current heatwave is a stark contrast to the pleasant weather Bengaluru usually enjoys in March.

According to the IMD, March 2022 was recorded as the hottest month with temperatures touching 33 degrees Celsius.

According to A Prasad, an official with the IMD in Bengaluru, "The early heat is concerning for all of us. We did notice a rise in temperature from the second week of March. Last year, the maximum temperatures only reached 29 degrees Celsius in February, Unfortunately, the situation is expected to worsen by April and May."

The temperature rise could be attributed to a combination of factors, including El Nino's influence, rising global temperatures, and a shift in weather patterns. The lack of pre-monsoon showers has also delayed the onset of summer rains, which can disrupt global weather patterns and contribute to increased heat in certain regions. Additionally, the declining green cover in Bengaluru and surrounding areas could be trapping more heat, further intensifying the urban heat island effect, said Prasad.

Heatwave also raises concerns about water scarcity, as rising temperatures lead to increased water demand in the City. The situation has caused the water bodies to dry up making it crucial for people to take precautions. *—Salar News*

March temperatures for the past 5 years

Year	Temp in °C
2023	30
2022	33
2021	31
2020	29
2019	29.8

Gowda hints at switching party over ticket denial

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Amid speculation that Congress has contacted him, former Chief Minister and BJP MP D V Sadananda Gowda on Monday said he will share his "inner feelings" soon.

The 71-year-old former Union minister, who celebrated his birthday on Monday, expressed his displeasure over being denied the ticket to contest from Bengaluru North again and said "There is nothing left to say that BJP is a party with a difference in State"

BJP shifted Union Minister of State for Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Shobha Karandlaje, who is currently representing Udupi Chikmagalur Lok Sabha segment, to contest from Bangalore North.

"I was contacted by others, it is also true that our party leaders also contacted and discussed with me. Last night a predominant office bearer of our party came to me and tried to pacify me. Various things are happening," Gowda, a former State BJP president, said.

Sadananda Gowda *PHOTO: PTI*

Claiming that BJP National General Secretary and State in-charge Radha Mohan Das Agarwal had told him that out of 28 constituencies, Bengaluru North was the only segment where there was no other candidate other than him, Gowda said he has information about certain developments that have happened in Delhi and here in the party.

"I had decided to stay away from electoral politics, but I was pulled back asking me to contest by all senior state leaders, but no one came to my rescue at the last minute, and have caused some embarrassment to me," he said.

He said despite knowing things, sacrificing someone for selfish motives "will hurt." *—PTI*

Sumalatha to contest from Chikkaballapura?

CHIKKABALLAPUR 18 MARCH

BJP is considering sitting Lok Sabha member Sumalatha Ambareesh's candidature from the Chikkaballapur Lok Sabha constituency with an eye on the presence of a large number of Vokkaliga and Balijiga voters in the constituency.

The development comes as it is known that JD(S) candidate would contest from the Mandya constituency. As Sumalatha's husband, late cine actor Ambareesh belonged to the Vokkaliga community, voters from the community are likely to be in favour of her. BN Bacche Gowda, the sitting MP had decided to retire from active politics. Former minister K Sudhakar and Alok Vishwanath son of Yelahanka BJP Legislator Vishwanath were considered as contenders for the ticket from the constituency. While Sudhakar met former chief minister HD Kumaraswamy for support, Vishwanath turned to his contacts to get ticket for his son
—Salar News

Sumalatha *PHOTO: PTI*

POLICE BRUTALITY

Sex workers get ₹20K compensation for assault

VAISHNAVI GOPALRAJ
BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

The sex workers from the City who were assaulted by the City police in 2019, have been granted a compensation of Rs 20,000 by the State Human Rights Commission for the violence inflicted by the police. Gowramma (name changed) and Suma (name changed), who underwent police brutality were given compensation by the State government on Monday.

While speaking to Salar News, Gowramma, who continues to work for Sadhana Mahila Sangha as a counsellor to fellow sex workers recalled the disturbing incident from 2019.

Sex workers expressed that although they received compensation the trauma of their experience still haunts them *PHOTO: PTI*

She said, "I and my fellow sex workers were at a City hotel for coffee and snacks when police officers arrived and humiliated us in front of the public. When some of us tried to hide in the hotel bathroom, they broke the door and caught me and Suma, while the rest managed to escape. Later, we were dragged to the station. In the evening, we were beaten up for no reason."

"Despite being handicapped, police still belted me," Suma said.

Gowramma said she even contemplated suicide after the humiliation but chose not to, as she did not want to convey weakness to her community. Instead, she decided to file a complaint and fight for her rights.

Geetha, a founding member of the Sadhana Mahila Sangha, said that there is a need for sensitising the police and other law enforcement agencies on the rights of sex workers. Geetha urged the police to treat sex workers with dignity, refraining from verbal or physical abuse, violence, or coercion into any sexual activity.

The sex workers expressed that although they received compensation of Rs 20,000, the trauma of their experience still haunts them, and no amount of compensation can fully heal their pain. They said that sex workers deserve to live with dignity and have their human rights respected, regardless of their profession.

Arvind Narayan, a lawyer from the People's Union for Civil Liberties Karnataka, who filed the complaint, noted that since 2019, incidents of violence by police officers against sex workers have decreased. Through these cases, we aim to remind police officers that sex workers also have the right to live without being victims of violence.
—Salar News

PM 'violated' poll code using IAF chopper: TMC MP

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Trinamool Congress MP Saket Gokhale on Monday filed a complaint against Prime Minister Narendra Modi alleging that he violated the poll code by using an Indian Air Force helicopter to attend an election rally in Andhra Pradesh.

In a letter to Chief electoral officer, Andhra Pradesh, Gokhale referred to Modi's visit to Chilakaluripet in Palnadu district on Sunday, where Modi addressed a NDA rally along with TDP Chief N Chandrababu Naidu.

Gokhale said PM Modi arrived at the venue of the rally, which was a part of election campaigning for the BJP, in an IAF helicopter on Sunday evening. IGokhale pointed out that the EC guidelines say there shall be a "total and absolute ban on the use of official vehicles for campaigning during elections". *—PTI*

Nath's close aide, other MP Cong workers join BJP

BHOPAL, 18 MARCH

Ahead of Lok Sabha polls, a close associate of former Madhya Pradesh chief minister Kamal Nath and some other functionaries of Opposition Congress joined the ruling BJP on Monday. Bahujan Samaj Party's state in-charge also joined BJP.

Syed Zafar, a former Congress spokesperson, joined BJP in Bhopal in the presence of Chief Minister Mohan Yadav and the party's state head VD Sharma.

Zafar, a native of Chhindwara, was considered a close associate of Congress veteran and former chief minister Kamal Nath. However, state Congress media department chairman KK Mishra said Zafar was not holding any post in the party. Earlier this month, there were speculations that Nath might switch over to BJP. *—PTI*

1 more Bilkis' convict moves SC over verdict

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

One more convict in the Bilkis Bano case has moved Supreme Court seeking a review of its 8 January verdict cancelling remission of his sentence, contending that it cannot be challenged based on the nature of the crime and "society's cry for justice". The review plea filed by Ramesh Rupabhai Chandana said the top court erred while passing the impugned order and overruling judgment dated 13 May, 2022, passed by another bench of the apex court.

Listing reasons for seeking a review, the plea said the top court bench erred in its finding "on the ground that the remission order passed by the competent authority cannot be challenged on factual grounds, inter alia, the nature of the crime, impact on society and society's cry for justice after the conviction and sentence has attained finality in the eyes of law." *—PTI*

Chavan dismisses Rahul's claim on meeting Sonia

CHHATRAPATI SAMBHAJINAGAR, 18 MARCH

BJP Rajya Sabha member Ashok Chavan, who last month quit Congress, on Monday said he did not meet Sonia Gandhi before leaving the grand old party and dismissed Rahul Gandhi's comments in this regard as "baseless". Addressing a rally in Mumbai on Sunday ahead of the upcoming Lok Sabha polls, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi claimed a leader from Maharashtra cried in front of his mother Sonia Gandhi, saying he felt ashamed that he could not "fight this power anymore and didn't want to go to jail". Reacting to it, Chavan in a video message on Monday said Rahul Gandhi made the statement in a rally on Sunday and did not take anybody's name.

"But if he is saying that about me, then it is illogical and baseless. The truth is that till I resigned from Congress, I was working at the party headquarters. I resigned from the post of MLA and a few moments later resigned from the party also. Till then, no one knew that I had resigned," Chayan said. *—PTI*

'Shakti' is not about religious power: Rahul

'Was talking about Shakti of unrighteousness, graft'

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of twisting his words *PHOTO: PTI*

Under attack for his "fight against Shakti" remark made at a rally in Mumbai, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday clarified that he was not talking about any religious power but the 'Shakti' of unrighteousness, corruption and falsehood.

He accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of twisting his words and said he was speaking about the power of which Modi was wearing the mask.

"Modi ji does not like my words, he always tries to change their meaning by twisting them in some way or the other because he knows that I have spoken a solemn truth.

"The 'shakti' (power) that I mentioned, Modi ji is the mask of that power and we are fighting against it. It is such a power that today it has captured India's voice, India's institutions, CBI, I-T, ED, Election Commission, the media, Indian industry and the entire constitutional structure of India in its clutches," he said in a post in Hindi on X.

Using the same 'shakti' (power), he alleged, Prime Minister Narendra Modi waives loans worth thousands of crores from Indian banks, while an Indian farmer commits suicide when he is unable to repay a loan of a few thousand rupees.

Hitting back at Modi, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said Modi is just a "master" of diverting public attention.

She said the people of the country are struggling with inflation, unemployment and economic crisis, the youth are disappointed and the farmers are committing suicide. She also alleged that demonetisation and the implementation of Goods and Services Tax (GST) ruined lakhs of industries.

"But the prime minister's priority is to divert public attention by twisting the statements of opposition leaders," Vadra said in a post in Hindi.

At a rally in Mumbai, Gandhi commented that, "We are not fighting against a political party... We are not fighting against Narendra Modi, nor are we fighting against one person. But, one face has been projected in the forefront."

"In Hindu dharma, there is a word 'shakti'. We are fighting against a 'shakti' (power). The question arises as to what is that 'shakti'...," he said where several leaders of the Opposition were present.

Congress also hit back at Modi over his remark that INDIA bloc's manifesto talks about finishing 'shakti', saying the elections will decide whether the country would be run by 'Asuri Shakti' (demonic power) or 'Daivik Shakti' (divine power). *— PTI*

PONMUDI'S APPOINTMENT

Enforcement Directorate officials take Tamil Nadu Higher Education Minister K Ponmudi for enquiry *PHOTO: PTI*

SC to consider TN's plea against Governor

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Supreme Court on Monday agreed to consider a plea of the Tamil Nadu government against the refusal of Governor RN Ravi to appoint senior DMK leader K Ponmudi as a minister in the state cabinet.

The governor has recently refused to re-induct the senior DMK leader and former Higher Education Minister into the state cabinet, saying it would be against constitutional morality.

A bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud and Justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra took note of the submissions of senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, appearing for the state government, there was some urgency in the matter which should be listed for hearing.

The state government has sought a direction to the governor to act as per the aid and advice of the council of ministers led by Chief Minister MK Stalin.

The plea said that once the conviction was stayed, there was no legal and constitutional bar on re-induction of Ponmudi in the state cabinet.

The senior DMK leader was disqualified as an MLA under the Representation of the People Act after the Madras High Court recently reversed his acquittal in the disproportionate assets case. The state government then reinstated Ponmudi as a legislator after Supreme Court suspended his conviction in a disproportionate assets case. *—PTI*

DELHI EXCISE POLICY

BRS leader K Kavitha was on Saturday remanded in ED custody till 23 March in the case. *PHOTO: PTI*

Kavitha moves SC against her arrest

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

BRS leader K Kavitha has moved Supreme Court, challenging her arrest by Enforcement Directorate in connection with the Delhi excise policy case.

Kavitha was on Saturday remanded in ED custody till 23 March in the case.

Kavitha has sought the quashing of the arrest memo, the arrest order dated 15 March and the remand order dated 16 March passed by a special judge in a "patently routine and mechanical manner".

Earlier, in another petition filed in the top court, she challenged the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

Kavitha conspired with Kejriwal, Sisodia: ED

Kavitha and some others "conspired" with top AAP leaders, including Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia, to get favours in the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy by paying Rs 100 crore to the political party that rules Delhi, ED alleged on Monday.

By the acts of "corruption and conspiracy" in the formulation and implementation of Delhi excise policy 2021-22, a continuous stream of illegal funds in the form of kickback from the wholesalers was generated for AAP, it said.

It alleged "Kavitha and her associates were to recover the proceeds of crime paid in advance to AAP and to further generate profits/proceeds of crime from this entire conspiracy."

The agency told PMLA court that she was "one of the kingpins of the Delhi excise policy scam". *—PTI*

KEJRIWAL SKIPS ED SUMMONS IN JAL BOARD CASE

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday skipped Enforcement Directorate (ED) summons in a money laundering case linked to alleged irregularities in the Delhi Jal Board, with Aam Aadmi Party terming the notice "illegal".

AAP accused BJP government at the Centre of "using" ED to target Kejriwal and stop him from campaigning in the Lok Sabha polls.

Kejriwal was summoned by ED to appear before it on Monday in a money laundering probe linked to alleged irregularities in the Delhi Jal Board. He is also facing inquiries in the Delhi excise policy-linked money laundering case and has previously disregarded eight summons in that matter, terming those "illegitimate".

The federal probe agency has issued a ninth summons to Kejriwal to appear for questioning on 21 March in the excise policy-linked money laundering case.

AAP's Delhi unit convener Gopal Rai said, "It is beyond understanding when will ED stop serving the political agenda of BJP. ED served notices and Chief Minister replied to them saying they were illegal. ED went to court against him. When the matter is in court, what is the urgency of sending another notice," he asked. *—PTI*

Can't stay HP MLAs' disqualification: SC

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Supreme Court on Monday refused to stay the Himachal Pradesh Assembly Speaker's order disqualifying the six Congress rebels who had cross-voted in the recent Rajya Sabha polls in the state.

A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta issued a notice to the office of Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania and sought its response within four weeks on a plea by the six rebels challenging their disqualification from the Assembly.

The bench said that pending adjudication of their plea, these disqualified MLAs will not be allowed to vote or participate in the proceedings of the assembly.

The court posted the matter for hearing on 6 May and gave the petitioners one week to file a rejoinder. The filing of nominations for the six vacant assembly seats starts on 7 May.

The six rebels -- Sudhir Sharma, Ravi Thakur, Rajinder Rana, Inder Dutt Lakhanpal, Chetanya Sharma and Devinder Kumar Bhutto -- were disqualified on 29 February for defying a Congress whip to be present in the House and vote in favour of the Himachal Pradesh government during the cut motion and budget.

Following the disqualification of the rebels, the effective strength of the House has gone down to 62 from 68, while the number of Congress MLAs has shrunk to 34 from 40.

Under the anti-defection law, any elected member who gives up the membership of a political party voluntarily or votes or abstains from voting in the House, contrary to any direction issued by his political party, is liable for disqualification. *—PTI*

BOOST TO EDAPPADI

HC restrains OPS from using AIADMK's symbol, flag

CHENNAI, 18 MARCH

Expelled AIADMK leader O Paneerselvam and Edappadi Palanisamy *PHOTO: PTI*

Madras High Court on Monday restrained expelled AIADMK leader O Paneerselvam from using the official letterhead, reserved symbol "Two Leaves" and the flag of the party.

Justice N Sathishkumar passed the order on a suit and applications filed by AIADMK general secretary and former Chief Minister Edappadi K Palaniswami.

Originally, on a suit filed by Palaniswami, Justice Sathishkumar had on 7 November, 2023 passed an interim order, restraining Paneerselvam from using the party letterhead, symbol and flag. Aggrieved, OPS, as Paneerselvam is known, had filed appeals.

A division bench comprising Justices R Mahadevan and Mohammed Shaffiq had on 11 January, 2024 dismissed the three appeals filed by OPS.

The bench granted liberty to the expelled leader to approach the single Judge by filing necessary applications seeking to vacate the order, if any, passed against him. On filing of such application, the Judge shall consider and pass appropriate orders, on its own merits and by law, the bench had added. *—PTI*

DMK NAMES 9 SEATS THAT CONG WILL CONTEST

CHENNAI, 18 MARCH

Days after allotting nine Lok Sabha seats to Congress in Tamil Nadu and the only segment in Puducherry, DMK on Monday named the specific constituencies that the grand old party, a key ally, will contest from.

Sivaganga, Cuddalore, Krishnagiri, Kanniyakumari, Tiruvallur (Reserved), Mayiladuthurai, Tirunelveli, Karur and Virudhunagar are the nine Lok Sabha seats given by the ruling DMK to Congress for the upcoming general election.

DMK President MK Stalin and Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) President K Selvaperunthagai signed an agreement at the ruling party's headquarters Anna Arivalayam on Monday, specifically naming the constituencies allotted.

DMK has also allotted the lone LS segment in Puducherry to Congress.

DMK allotted Tiruchirappalli LS segment to Vaiko-led MDMK, a constituency represented by Congress party's Su Thirunavukkarasar. MDMK has named Principal Party Secretary and Vaiko's son Durai Vaiko as its candidate for Tiruchirappalli. *—PTI*

Poll code violation: Cong, BJP accuse each other

GUWAHATI/ SHIMLA, 18 MARCH

Assam Opposition parties Congress and Trinamool Congress (TMC) have alleged that the state's BJP-led government has violated the election model code of conduct (MCC) by failing to remove official advertisements featuring Prime Minister and Chief Minister.

State Congress president Bhupen Kumar Borah and TMC state Chief Ripun Bora have separately written to Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar expressing their concerns.

Meanwhile, Leader of Opposition Jai Ram Thakur on Monday said BJP has filed a complaint with the State Election Commission alleging that forms to get Rs 1,500 per month are being filled in the offices of the block development office and panchayats to woo the voters by Congress.

"Distributing and filling forms with the photographs of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu is a violation of Model Code of Conduct enforced for the Lok Sabha polls," Thakur said. *—PTI*

AZAM GETS JAIL IN DEMOLITION CASE

RAMPUR, 18 MARCH

A court here on Monday sentenced SP leader Azam Khan to seven years in prison and imposed a fine of Rs 8 lakh on him over forced demolition of a house in Dungarpur in 2016.

The MP-MLA court also sentenced three others to 5 years in prison and imposed a fine of Rs 2.5 lakh on each of them in the case. The court convicted Azam, former Uttar Pradesh minister Azhar Ahmed Khan, a former chairperson of the municipal corporation Ale Hasan, former police circle officer, and Barkat Ali. *—PTI*

ELECTORAL BONDS

Congress accuses Modi govt of extortion

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said with each passing day, more examples emerge on "electoral bond scam" *PHOTO: PTI*

Stepping up its attack on Centre over the electoral bonds issue, Congress on Monday accused Modi government of "hafta vasuli" (extortion) and claimed that 21 firms facing investigations from CBI, ED, or IT have donated through electoral bonds.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said that with each passing day, more examples emerge on the true depths of the "electoral bond scam".

"Today, we zoom in on 'Pradhan Mantri Hafta Vasuli Yojana', the second of the four channels of corruption in the Electoral Bond Scam: 1. Chanda Do, Dhandha Lo 2. Hafta Vasuli," Ramesh said in a post on X.

Congress on Sunday charged the government with engaging in "quid pro quo" for receiving electoral bonds and "conspiring" to route black money into BJP's accounts through the scheme. Ramesh had said Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah were answerable for the electoral bond "scam".

Following a Supreme Court directive, State Bank of India (SBI), which was the authorised seller of electoral bonds, shared the data with the poll panel on 12 March.

- Congress charged government with engaging in "quid pro quo" for receiving electoral bonds and "conspiring" to route black money into BJP's accounts

SBI said a total of 22,217 electoral bonds of varying denominations were purchased by donors between 1 April, 2019, and 15 February this year, out of which 22,030 were redeemed by political parties. *—PTI*

Electoral bonds dropped at office, received by post: Parties

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Several political parties declined to share details of electoral bond donors citing various legal provisions, while others said they received the funding instruments through "drop box" or by post without any name.

DMK, which received most of its donations from a lottery firm, reached out to its donors to seek details of the electoral bonds as demanded by the Supreme Court in 2019.

BJP cited the amendments to the Representation of People Act, 1951 and the relevant portions of the Reserve Bank of India Act and the Income Tax Act for not revealing its donors.

Congress shot off a letter to the State Bank of India (SBI) seeking details of donors of electoral bonds, the amount, the bank account in which it was credited and the date.

Samajwadi Party shared details of bonds of relatively smaller amounts of Rs 1 lakh and Rs 10 lakh, but merely mentioned that 10 bonds of Rs 1 crore each were received by post without any name.

DMK, which received almost 77 per cent of its funds from lottery king Santiago Martin's Future Gaming, said it had reached out to the donors of the party to get details of the donations they had made.

Trinamool Congress said the electoral bonds were sent to the party office and were "dropped in the drop box". The party said some bonds were sent through messengers from various persons who wished to support the party, many of whom prefer to remain anonymous.

NCP, then led by Sharad Pawar, expressed it's inability to furnish details of donors against each bond as the party had not maintained details or issued any receipts.

Nitish Kumar-led Janata Dal (United) has told Election Commission that someone delivered to its office an envelope with electoral bonds worth Rs 10 crore in 2019, which were redeemed by the party. *—PTI*

20 devotees injured as railing collapses at Mathura temple

MATHURA, 18 MARCH

Over 20 people were injured when the railing of a staircase broke at Radha Rani temple in Barsana which was brimming with devotees, the temple priest said on Monday. The incident took place on Sunday evening when devotees were waiting for several hours for the doors of the temple to open. A pre-holi celebration was organised at the temple and a huge number of devotees had flocked to the temple when the railing collapsed, according to the temple priest. Manoj Vashishtha, in charge of Barsana's Community Health Centre, said 22 people were brought to the centre after the incident and most of them suffered fractures. The crowd was subsequently controlled and the devotees were facilitated in having a darshan. According to eyewitnesses, a large number of devotees were trying to get hold of 'ladoos' when the incident took place.*—PTI*

2 kids drown in open water tank at public garden in Mumbai

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Two boys drowned in an open water tank in a public garden in central Mumbai and their bodies were recovered on Monday, police said.Brothers Arjun,4, and Ankush Waghari,5, drowned in a water tank at Maharshi Karve Garden in Wadala on Sunday night, an official from RAK Marg police station said. According to the police, the boys, who lived in the locality, had come to the garden to play and went missing. The parents lodged a missing person's complaint later in the night after they couldn't find the boys despite an extensive search, the official said. The children fell into the tank as the lid was left open and the opening was covered with thin layers of cloth, he said.*—PTI*

4 coaches of Sabarmati-Agra superfast train derail

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Four coaches of the Sabarmati-Agra superfast train derailed near the Ajmer station on Monday morning. No loss of life was reported in the incident that occurred at around 1am, adding that the express train was on its way to Agra."The incident took place when the train crossed Ajmer station and it was about to reach Madar station. The reason for the derailment is not known yet," Shashi Kiran, Chief Public Relations Officer, North Western Railway (NWR) Zone said. "No injury or casualty has been reported. The train movement in the up/down direction towards the Delhi side has already started. *—PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Cheetah Gamini gave birth to 6 cubs, not 5: Environment min

BHOPAL, 18 MARCH

African cheetah 'Gamini' has given birth to six cubs at the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh's Sheopur district, and not five as reported previously, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said on Monday.On 10 March, Yadav shared the information that the five-year-old South African cheetah gave birth to five cubs at the Kuno National Park (KNP).nIn a post on his official X account on Monday morning, Yadav said, "Gamini's legacy leaps forward! There is no end to joy: It is not five, but six cubs! A week after the news of five cubs born to Gamini, it is now confirmed that Gamini, the South African cheetah mother, has given birth to six cubs, a record of sorts for a first-time mother."

—PTI

5 held for attack on foreign students of Guj varsity

The police have formed nine teams to probe and identify culprits

AHMEDABAD, 18 MARCH

A total of five persons have been arrested by police in connection with an attack on international students at the Gujarat University hostel for offering Namaz even as the varsity decided to relocate foreign students to a new wing and engage ex-servicemen to bolster security.

Police, which has formed nine teams to probe and identify all the assailants, arrested three more persons -- Kshitij Pandey, Jitendra Patel, and Sahil Dudhatiya -- on Monday, adding to the initial arrests of Hitesh Mevada and Bharat Patel.

This brings the total number of arrested persons to five, police said, adding efforts were underway to nab the remaining culprits.

The incident, which involved a group assaulting students for offering prayers near the hostel block on Saturday, prompted the university to relocate foreign students to a new wing and engage ex-servicemen to bolster security.

Police investigate the Gujarat University hostel campus where foreign students were assaulted *PHOTO: PTI*

Taking immediate measures, the government-run university has decided to transfer international students to a separate hostel designated for Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) within three days.

Additionally, a foreign student advisory committee has been established, along with the deployment of ex-Army personnel to fortify the hostel premises' security.

- Additionally, a foreign student advisory committee has been established, along with the deployment of ex-Army personnel to fortify the hostel premises' security

Gujarat University's Vice Chancellor, Neerja Gupta, announced the immediate replacement of the study abroad program coordinator and NRI hostel warden.

Police have registered an FIR against 20-25 unidentified assailants for various offences including rioting, voluntarily causing harm, and criminal trespass.

Two students - one from Sri Lanka and another from Tajikistan - were hospitalised after the incident took place on Saturday night, police said.

Amid these developments, the Gujarat High Court declined to intervene as a probe agency, affirming that not every incident warrants a Public Interest Litigation (PIL).

The court's stance emphasises the role of law enforcement in addressing the matter, urging legal channels for those seeking recourse on specific issues related to the incident.

"Don't substitute this court with police inspectors. Don't make us the inspector of police. We are not investigating officers," Gujarat High Court Chief Justice Sunita Agarwal said.

Police Commissioner GS Malik told reporters on Sunday that Minister of State for Home Harsh Sanghavi had held a meeting with police officers and instructed them to take strict and judicial action in the matter.

"Some 20-25 people entered the hostel premises (on Saturday night) and objected to the international students offering namaz there, asking them to do so in a mosque. They argued over the issue, assaulting them and hurling stones. They also vandalised their rooms," the police commissioner had said. There are around 300 international students enrolled at the Gujarat University, including from Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Sri Lanka and countries in the African continent, Malik said. In a related development, civil society groups condemned the attack on international students and demanded strict action against the perpetrators and police personnel who allegedly failed to stop the attack.

—PTI

7 die in Kolkata building collapse, Didi assures stern action

KOLKATA, 18 MARCH

PHOTO: PTI

At least Seven people, including two women, were killed and several others injured after an under-construction five-story building collapsed in Garden Reach area of Kolkata, police said on Monday.

The toll could go up since at least four people were spotted trapped under the debris and only one of them showed signs of life, a fire services official, engaged in rescue operations, said.

Kolkata Mayor Firhad Hakim said the rescue operations were carried out on war footing at the site where the building was being constructed illegally.

While Md Wasim, the promoter of the building, was arrested, the mayor said stringent action would be taken as per law.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee visited the building collapse site at Azan Molla Lane in the city's western periphery and assured locals of stern action against illegal construction.

She said the government will provide compensation to the next of kin of each deceased and the injured people. Hakim, also West Bengal's urban development minister, said, "I spoke to Chief Minister and we will provide Rs 5 lakh to the next of kin of each deceased and Rs one lakh to each injured person." *—PTI*

REAL OR FAKE?

People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) India and actor Priyamani donated a life-size mechanical elephant to Thrikkayil Mahadeva Temple in Kochi following the temple's decision to never own or hire live elephant *PHOTO: PTI*

Adani Power sought over Rs 1,300 crore as late payment surcharge from the Jaipur Vidyut Vitran Nigam Limited *PHOTO: PTI*

SC junks Adani's plea against R'than discom

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Supreme Court on Monday dismissed a plea of Adani Power Rajasthan Ltd seeking over Rs 1,300 crore as late payment surcharge from the Jaipur Vidyut Vitran Nigam Limited, a Rajasthan government-owned power distribution firm.

Imposing Rs 50,000 as cost on Adani Power Rajasthan Ltd (APRL), a bench comprising Justices Aniruddha Bose and PV Sanjay Kumar ruled that filing of a miscellaneous application was not the proper legal recourse to late payment surcharge (LPS) by the Adani firm.

The detailed judgement is awaited. The top court, on 24 January, had reserved its judgement.

Jaipur Vidyut Vitran Nigam Limited (JVVNL), represented by senior advocate Dushyant Dave, had vehemently opposed the plea of Adani Power seeking over Rs 1,300 crore as LPS from the state discom.

Adani firm was seeking modification of a three-judge bench verdict delivered on 30 August, 2020 on the plea of JVVNL through a miscellaneous application which is filed in pending cases.

The top court, in its 2020 verdict, had upheld the orders of the Rajasthan Electricity Regulatory Commission and Appellate Tribunal for Electricity, observing that Adani firm was entitled to compensatory tariff but not to the LPS as claimed.

Adani firm has sought payment of Rs 1376.35 crore as the LPS "outstanding" since 30 June, 2022 in terms of the power purchase agreement.

The state discom, JVVNL, has opposed the plea, saying it was filed in a case already decided by the top court in 2020.

—PTI

9 die as jeep rams into tractor in Bihar

Khagaria, 18 March

Nine people, including three children, were killed as their jeep collided head-on with a tractor in Bihar's Khagaria district on Monday morning, police said. Six people were also injured in the accident that happened around 6.30am near a petrol pump on National Highway 31 in Pasraha area, they said."- Those travelling in the jeep were returning from a wedding when the accident happened. The tractor was overloaded," a police officer said. The deceased were identified as Gautam Thakur,32, Monu Kumar,7, Aman Kumar,25, Bunty Kumar, Anshu Kumar,23, Paltu Thakur,50, Dilo Kimar,10, Prakash Singh and Dharmendra Sharma *—PTI*

Google blocks email over man's nude childhood pic, gets notice

AHMEDABAD, 18 MARCH

Uploading a nude childhood photo on Google Drive cost a man access to his email account for nearly a year and forced him to knock on the doors of Gujarat High Court.

The High Court has issued a notice to Google India Pvt Limited for blocking the email account of the petitioner for "explicit child abuse" after he uploaded on Google Drive a photo of his grandmother bathing him when he was two years old.

The court of Justice Vaibhavi D Nanavati on 15 March issued notices to Google, Central and state government's returnable on 26 March.

- Court has issued a notice to Google India Pvt Limited for blocking the email account of the petitioner

The petitioner, Neel Shukla, a computer engineer, uploaded childhood photographs on Google Drive, including a picture of him being bathed by his grandmother as a toddler.

The tech giant blocked Shukla's account in April last year for violating its policy regarding such contents showing "explicit child abuse", his counsel Dipen Desai said to the court. Desai informed the court that since Google blocked the email account, Shukla has been unable to access his emails and this has caused losses to his business. The petitioner also requested an urgent hearing, as he received a notice from Google stating that the data linked to his account would be deleted in April, a year after it was rendered inoperative.

—PTI

PURCHASE OF 12 CHOPPERS

SC junks bail plea of AgustaWestland 'middleman'

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Supreme Court on Monday refused to entertain a fresh bail plea of Christian Michel James, an alleged middleman who is being probed by the CBI and the ED in the alleged Rs 3,600-crore AgustaWestland chopper scam cases relating to the purchase of 12 VVIP helicopters.

It was argued that James cannot be charged under any other offences apart from those mentioned in the extradition decree and he be granted the benefit of the doctrine of speciality. He was arrested in December 2018 after being extradited from Dubai.

"How can you file the Article 32 (one of provisions in the Constitution which gives right to move the SC for enforcement of fundamental rights) petition in this case?" asked a bench comprising Chief Justice DY Chandrachud and justices JB Pardiwala and Manoj Misra.

Dealing with the submission that James cannot be charged for other offences which were not part of the extradition decree, the bench said this has been dealt by it earlier also and it cannot go "ad nauseum"

PHOTO: PTI

(repeating the same thing until it becomes boring and annoying).The counsel for the extradited accused said he has been in jail for the last five years and this can be the maximum sentence that can be awarded to him in case of conviction.On 7 February last year, the top court had denied bail to James and rejected the submission that he be released on the ground that he has completed half of maximum sentence in the cases. The CJI, while writing the judgment, had said James may pursue his remedy of regular bail before the trial court in the case.Dismissing the bail pleas in both the CBI and ED cases in 2021, a trial court had said considering the overall facts and circumstances, the serious nature of the accusations, the gravity of the offence and the conduct of the accused, it did not consider the case fit for bail. *— PTI*

RITUAL FOR RAINS

Assam locals get frogs married to please rain gods

BISWANATH, 18 MARCH

Amidst the ongoing problem of drought in Assam, locals of Adarsha Gorehagi village in Biswanath district have resorted to age-old ways to please the rain gods; marrying of frogs in a ceremony with proper rituals.

The ceremony, also known as 'Bhekuli Biya', saw enthusiastic participation from villagers of all ages as they fervently hoped for the skies to open up and bring relief to their drought-stricken lands.

The prolonged absence of rainfall has cast a shadow of distress over the agricultural community in the state, where farmers are grappling with the harsh realities of drought and dust storms.

The ceremony, also known as 'Bhekuli Biya', saw enthusiastic participation from villagers of all ages as they fervently hoped for the skies to open up and bring relief *PHOTO: ANI*

A frog wedding is an ancient ceremony that involves marrying wild frogs with traditional rituals to please the rain god to get relief from the drought-like situation.

The people present there asserted that the ritual will certainly work and they will get respite from this situation. "There is no water in ponds. There is no food for cattle and goats. Facing a drought-like condition, 700 families of Gorehagi village conducted frog marriage," a local woman told ANI.

- The people present there asserted that the ritual will certainly work and they will get respite from this situation

"There has been no rainfall from the past many days and due to non-availability of rain many trees are dying, and the paddy fields are dry.

The farmers are facing massive problems. So, the villagers of Gorhagi village have decided to conduct frog marriage and it is our tradition. As our ancestors suggested, we have decided to perform frog marriage with proper rituals and all villagers have participated," a local youth said. *—ANI*

Odisha truck owners start 24-hour bandh

KEONJHAR, 18 MARCH

A truck owners' association in the mineral-rich Keonjhar district of Odisha began a 24-hour bandh from 6am on Monday in protest against the proposed railway project aimed at transporting minerals.

The project aims to connect Odisha Mining Corporation's Gandhamardan B mines at Suakati to Gohaldihi railway siding.

All business establishments and educational institutions in the district remained shut, leading to disruptions in vehicular movement. Protesters intercepted a passenger train and two goods trains at Keonjhar railway station.

While the bandh has impacted normal life and mineral transportation in the district, emergency services have been exempted from the bandh's purview.

Debu Patnaik, the joint secretary of the Keonjhar Truck Owners' association, expressed concerns over the potential unemployment among truckers if the project is implemented.

According to Patnaik, the project, if implemented, would transport iron ores via trains, adversely affecting the livelihoods of truckers and around 3-4 lakh people in the district.

He urged the government to revoke the project in the best interest of the district's populace. Additional SP Santosh Nayak said police forces have been deployed at the station.

—PTI

HIGH ALTITUDE FIGHT FOR LADAKH

Over 250 protesters defy -12°C temperatures, sleeping under the sky in Leh as Sonam Wangchuk's "Climate Fast" enters its 13th day on Monday. The Climate Fast is a fast unto-death protest demanding constitutional safeguards for the Union Territory of Ladakh, and protection of ecologically fragile Ladakh's ecosystem from industrial and mining lobbies

PHOTO: SCREENGRAB

The West must stop trying to solve Russia's problem

In perhaps the least surprising news of the year, Vladimir Putin has triumphed at the Russian ballot box and been enthroned for the fifth time as president. He will serve for six more years.

He will be 77 years old in 2030. According to the Constitution, which he re-wrote to his benefit in 2020, he then could stand again for a further six-year term.

To put that in perspective, Putin already has ruled Russia as president or prime minister for 24 years, or the equivalent of eight Australian parliamentary terms. In that period, Australia has had eight prime ministers and changed governing party three times. United States has had five different presidents; the United Kingdom seven different prime ministers.

In contrast to elections in the West, where the outcomes are genuinely in the hands of the voters and adjudicated by independent electoral commissions, Russia is different. As the former UK ambassador to Moscow, Laurie Bristow, wrote, "In Russia, the purpose of elections is to validate the decisions of its rulers, not to discover the will of the people."

A screen showing preliminary results of the presidential election in Moscow

PHOTO: EPA

Putin's jaded view of the West

Putin now will appoint a new government. His picks will be intensely scrutinised for clues to a succession plan and future policies. Although he is a master of surprise, we should not count on Putin leaving any time soon. Only four leaders of modern Russia and the USSR have left the top job alive; the rest have died in office of natural or other causes. Moreover, Putin's actions over the past two years have been directed at moving Russia from authoritarianism to semi-totalitarianism. The Carnegie Endowment's Andrei Kolesnikov has written persuasively of these tectonic shifts that recall the darkest years of Soviet Stalinism.

Putin has explicitly presented his war of choice in Ukraine as a proxy for a wider, long-term conflict with the West. He believes the West is irresolute, in decline, and easily distracted and deflected. Former US President Donald Trump's "have at them" attitude towards US allies and partners, and the woeful Western vacillation over further military aid to Ukraine, will only embolden Putin further. Buoyed by his ritual success in this weekend's election, he will embark on further risky and provocative adventurism.

Consequently, Putin – and the ideology of "Putinism" – pose a serious challenge for Western governments and policymakers who are genuinely accountable to their electorates, the party room, the parliamentary opposition, a vocal and inquisitorial media and an independent judiciary.

As exiled Russian journalist Mikhail Zygar has argued, part of Putin's statecraft is directed at making common cause with ultra-conservative Western political elements to contest global "wokeness", demobilise support for Ukraine, and dull resistance to Russian territorial ambitions in its neighbourhood.

How democratic governments need to respond

Putin is well aware that the inherent fractiousness of democracy and the need to court the fickle voters hobbles democratic governments' long-term planning.

Moreover, our political culture is predisposed to wanting to "solve" issues. Sometimes, though, problems of the scale posed by Russia or the Middle East can only be managed, not solved – and then only through joint efforts with like-minded allies and partners. That requires persistence and resilience to rise above short-term politicking and the twitches of our "instant expert" social media culture.

It also demands constant investment in building and sustaining public understanding of what really is at stake, beyond the borders of Europe that were drawn in the bloodshed and misery of the second world war.

This is difficult anywhere, not least in the West, where we have had it comparatively easy for most of the post-second world war era. We need stalwart and principled leadership now more than at any other point in the last 50 years. Most of all, we need ongoing serious and informed public conversations about what we value in and wish for in democratic societies, and the price we are willing to pay to attain and preserve that. That sort of discourse can be hard to generate in our politically rather apathetic society. However, it is vital when the institutions of our democracy are barraged by foreign information manipulation and interference designed to sow doubt and distrust and corrode popular faith in the integrity of our form of government.

Especially in Australia, we have allowed our already limited pool of Russia expertise to atrophy to near-extinction. It is well past time to re-invest, modestly but purposefully, in Russian language and associated studies at our universities. We need to boost "Russia literacy" and comprehension of a country that will remain a significant and disruptive player in the world. This matters to countries that matter to us. We should also honestly and critically assess the mistaken assumptions and indifference that at times have undermined effective Western policies towards post-Soviet Russia. However, we should not succumb to the propaganda peddled by Putin and his proteges abroad that Moscow is a blameless victim of Western perfidy and deception aimed at destroying the Russian state. Rather, as Australian professor Mark Edele writes in his recent book, Russia's War Against Ukraine: Russia never came to terms – either as a society or as a polity – with its transformation from a continental empire with global reach into a nation-state and a regional power. The Kremlin is marketing Russia as an ally of "the Global South" in resisting resurgent neo-colonialism and championing "multipolarity".

The Putin thesis is that Ukraine is a patsy of London and Washington, while Moscow is on the side of the formerly colonised. That argument is finding some ready ears, evident in the patchy support for sanctions on Russia. We cannot assume our own Indo-Pacific region is persuaded of the wrongness of the Kremlin's claims. The reality confronting us is that of a sullen and resentful Russia, convinced that history, morality and even divinity is on its side in a de facto existential war with the West.

Moreover, as Bristow, my former colleague in Moscow, has written: we would be unwise to assume that a rising generation of Russians will embrace a more democratic and pro-Western outlook.

—The Conversation

SALAR ساڈا

Microplastics pose risk to Indo-Gangetic plain

Polymers in microplastics may pose a risk to the Indo-Gangetic plain, a study on the Ganga and Yamuna rivers by the Goa-based CSIR-National Institute of Oceanography (NIO) has said.

Researchers behind the study have said their findings could serve as a starting point for an action plan required by municipal corporations to "mitigate plastic pollution and target the possible sources at each location."

Microplastics are extremely small pieces of plastic debris in the environment resulting from the disposal and breakdown of consumer products and industrial waste.

The study, titled 'A comprehensive assessment of macro and microplastics from Rivers Ganga and Yamuna: Unveiling the seasonal, spatial and risk factors', has been published in the 'Journal of Hazardous Materials' on Saturday.

As per the study, conducted by a team led by CSIR-NIO principal scientist Mahua Saha, microplastics were detected in the Ganga from Haridwar to Patna, with the pollutant concentration being higher during "wet (rainy) season than the dry season".

The high-hazard polymers in microplastics may pose a risk to the Indo-Gangetic plain, it said.

In surface water, during the wet season, the highest abundance of microplastics was found in Haridwar and the lowest was observed in Patna.

During the dry season, Agra had the highest affluence of microplastics, while Patna and Haridwar had the lowest concentration, as per the researchers.

The dispersion of microplastics is not limited to localised areas in the Ganga and Yamuna rivers

PHOTO: PTI

During the study, the researchers also identified the plastic leakage vulnerable regions using GIS applications and field surveys.

"Among all, Agra recorded the highest plastic leakage followed by Prayagraj, Patna and Haridwar. In contrast, the microplastic concentration was highest during the wet season compared to the dry season for surface water, water column and sediments," it said.

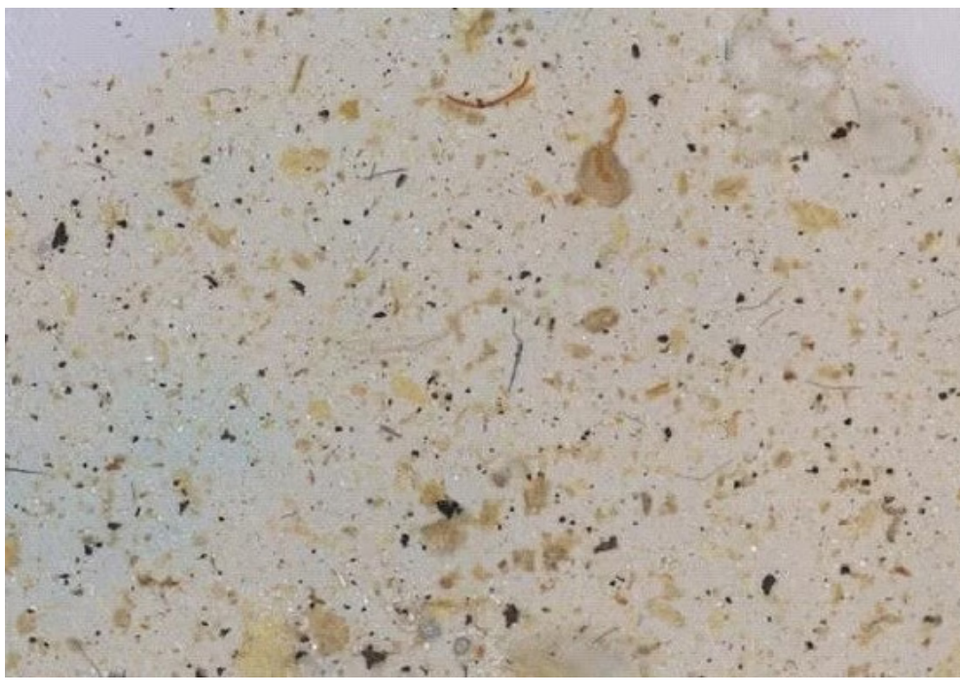
The microplastic abundance in surface water, water columns and sediments along the Ganga and Yamuna rivers differed evidently during the wet and dry seasons, the researchers concluded.

During the study, it was observed that significant waste was brought by the river from the upstream cities in the dry season and was deposited in the floodplain region.

These wastes get washed off during the wet season. "As a result, it is conceivable that over time, these macroplastics might have degraded into smaller pieces and subsequently transported into the adjacent river systems by urban run-off during the wet season," said the study.

The dispersion of microplastics is not limited to localised areas in the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, it said.

"However, it is challenging to distinguish the exact incorporation of microplastics between locally generated plastics and those carried from upstream sources since many rivers pass through the residential areas and due to the lack of awareness, sometimes local deposition of plastics into the river is much higher," the researchers said. The other researchers involved in the study included Priyansha Gupta, Akshata Naik, M Manish Kumar, Chaynika Rathore, Shrish Vashisth from the CSIR-NIO and Shukla Pai Maitra, K D Bharadwaj and Harsh Thakural from the Delhi-based National Productivity Council. *—PTI*



Microplastic fragments isolated from farm soil

PHOTO: JAYITA DE/ PRATIK BANERJEE, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS

LETTERS

Write to us at salar@salar.news

Why is BJP favoured to win even when Modi's economy is failing?

India will soon hold the biggest election ever conducted, starting on 19 April and running through June. Almost 950 million registered voters will be able to cast ballots to elect the 543 members of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of parliament.

The result is not a foregone conclusion, but most analysts expect Narendra Modi's BJP to win another five years in office. After a decade in power, the opinion polls suggest Modi is still well regarded by many Indians and the Opposition parties do not command wide support.

Slow growth, too few jobs

This situation might strike some as odd. Modi government's record is mixed – especially in managing the economy – and has disappointed many voters.

To be sure, as Modi frequently reminds voters, India has grown faster than many competitors in recent years. But BJP came to office ten years ago promising double-digit growth rates and it has never achieved that goal.

Worse still, it has struggled to generate jobs for millions of young people.

Critics point to errors in BJP economic policy they think have stifled growth and job creation. These include:

- The shock inflicted in 2016 by the sudden withdrawal of 85 per cent of paper money, ostensibly to combat corruption
- The bungled introduction of much-needed reforms to the agricultural sector
- The protection of India's big industrial conglomerates from domestic and foreign competition.

Taken together, critics charge, these mistakes have left too many people in precarious work and held back investment in manufacturing, which could offer more people more jobs.

Shoring up a Hindu nationalist base

Why, then, do so many Indians still support the Modi government?

Part of the answer lies in the BJP's ability to appeal to multiple constituencies with targeted messages.

Ruling India effectively depends on constructing and maintaining coalitions – either coalitions of parties or coalitions of voters. Modi's BJP does both. It is supported by several smaller parties in Parliament, but more important in terms of winning elections, is the patchwork quilt of different groups of voters it can marshal.

An angry protest against the government's plan to enact a controversial new citizenship law

PHOTO: EPA

At the centre of this quilt sits a group of convinced Hindu nationalists, motivated by an ideology known as "Hindutva". They argue that society and government should reflect what they believe is the will of the Hindu majority, numbering about 80 per cent of the population. For decades, they have campaigned to end what they perceive as unreasonable special protections given to religious minorities, including for places of worship and faith-based divorce and child custody laws, as well as the autonomous status of the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Step by step, over the past decade, the Modi government has met many of these demands, locking in the Hindu nationalist base for the BJP. In 2019, it revoked the constitutional amendments that limited New Delhi's rights to determine how Kashmir is governed. Earlier this year, Modi also presided over the opening ceremony of a new Hindu temple at Ayodhya, on the site of mosque demolished by Hindu nationalist activists in 1992. Soon after, the government announced a controversial new law will come into effect that will allow Hindus, Sikhs and others fleeing neighbouring Muslim-majority countries to gain Indian citizenship, but may permit the deportation of Muslims deemed to be illegal immigrants.

Courting women and urban, middle-class voters

The Hindu nationalist core is powerful, but it is not large enough to give BJP all the seats it needs to govern.

For that reason, the party has also tried to win over the growing urban middle class. This group is less interested in cultural issues and more concerned with good governance, as well as India's standing in the world.

In the last two elections, BJP won their support by promising to crack down on corruption, improve the country's business environment, build better infrastructure and restore national pride. It is promising to push on with this programme so it can hold on to this bloc of voters, and it likely will, in the absence of convincing alternatives.

At the same time, BJP will continue to seek the support of the rural poor and women, who might back left-wing parties or not vote at all.

To appeal to these groups in recent years, Modi government has doubled the funding for a rural income guarantee scheme, and launched other programs, including one to provide midday meals to schoolchildren. It has facilitated the opening of bank accounts for millions, including women. This allows them – in principle, at least – to circumvent corrupt officials and feckless husbands when it comes to receiving welfare payments. The government has also provided millions of rural homes with toilets and cooking gas bottles, arguing both make women safer.

A divided and weak Opposition

Modi government's success in winning over these groups is impressive, but it must be noted the BJP has never gained more than 40 per cent of the popular vote in a national election. If it faced a united and effective opposition, it might struggle to win office. Happily for BJP, Opposition parties are divided and weak. If they could join forces and put their support behind a single, strong candidate to challenge the BJP in individual districts, they might win more seats. However, negotiations to do this have proved tortuous.

Worse still, the fragile opposition alliance has not yet named a credible alternative candidate for the prime ministership. *—The Conversation*

Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks during a visit to his campaign headquarters after the presidential election in Moscow, Russia **PHOTO: PTI**

Putin hails victory that was preordained

Putin won 87.8% of vote, highest ever in post-Soviet history

MOSCOW, 18 MARCH

Russian President Vladimir Putin basked in a victory early Monday that was never in doubt, as partial election results underlined the Russian leader's total control of the country's political system.

After facing only token challengers and harshly suppressing opposition voices, Putin was set to extend his nearly quarter-century rule for six more years. Even with little margin for protest, Russians crowded outside polling stations at noon on Sunday, the last day of the election, apparently heeding an opposition call to express their displeasure with the president.

Putin hailed the overwhelming early results as an indication of "trust" and "hope" in him — while critics saw them as another reflection of the preordained nature of the election.

"Of course, we have lots of tasks ahead. But I want to make it clear for everyone: When we were consolidated, no one has ever managed to frighten us, to suppress our will and our self-conscience. They failed in the past and they will fail in the future," Putin said at a meeting with volunteers after polls closed.

Any public criticism of Putin or his war in Ukraine has been stifled. Independent media have been crippled. His fiercest political foe, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison last month, and other critics are either in jail or in exile.

Beyond the fact that voters had virtually no choice, independent monitoring of the election was extremely limited. According to Russia's Central Election Commission, Putin had some 87% of the vote with over 99% of precincts counted.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and the presidents of Honduras, Nicaragua and Venezuela quickly congratulated Putin on his victory, as did the leaders of the ex-Soviet Central Asian nations of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while the West dismissed the vote as a sham.

British Foreign Secretary David Cameron wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter: "This is not what free and fair elections look like."

In the tightly controlled environment, Navalny's associates urged those unhappy with Putin or the war to go to the polls at noon on Sunday — and lines outside a number of polling stations both inside Russia and at its embassies around the world appeared to swell at that time. *—PTI*

People stand in line outside a polling station in St Petersburg, in Russia on Monday **PHOTO: PTI**

Russians form queues at polling stations

MOSOCOW, 18 MARCH

Russia saw protests at polling stations on Sunday on the final day of voting in an election set to extend Russian President Vladimir Putin's long hold on power.

Lines at some polling stations in Russia grew suddenly at around 12pm local time Sunday, the hour at which supporters of the deceased opposition leader Alexey Navalny called on people to turn out collectively as a show of opposition support.

A CNN team at a polling station in Moscow said the line grew rapidly over a five- to ten-minute spell at around noon, and estimated 150 people had arrived.

The CNN team said that police were letting people in batches through the gates to pass through security, with metal detectors and bags being checked inside the building.

A voter, 39, said he had come at noon "to see other people, and they have come too."

A woman told the CNN team, "This is the first time in my life I have ever seen a queue for elections." Asked why she had come at that hour, she simply replied: "You know why. I think everybody in this queue knows why." *—CNN*

REACTIONS ACROSS GLOBE

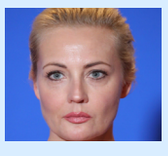
- Lithuania's Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis says Putin's election victory lacks legitimacy as people were not free to choose

- Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi has congratulated his Russian counterpart on his "decisive" win in the presidential election, media reports

- Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro says: "Our older brother has triumphed, which bodes well for world"

- Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky has labelled the election a "farce and parody"

Everything is not in vain, says Yulia Navalnya



Yulia Navalnya, who is the widow of the late Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, has thanked supporters for taking part in yesterday's "noon against Putin" protest. She has posted on X, formerly known as Twitter, and says she is grateful to the people "who stood with me from 12 noon for a whole six hours, side-by-side in line at the polling station" at the Russian embassy in Berlin. Yulia Navalnya called for people to form long queues at polling stations at midday on Sunday in a show of protest against President Putin. Navalnya says it gave her hope when people shouted "Yulia, we are with you" and called out her late husband's name. Alexei Navalny died last month in a remote penal colony in Siberia where he was being held on a 19-year sentence over charges that were widely seen as politically motivated. His wife also says that the supporters who came out gave her hope that "everything is not in vain, that we will still fight". —BBC News

Putin says he favoured Navalny's prisoner swap

MOSCOW, 18 MARCH

Russian President Vladimir Putin said early Monday that he supported an idea to release late opposition leader Alexei Navalny in a prisoner exchange just days before the man who was his biggest foe died.

In his first comments to address Navalny's death, Putin said of the dissident's demise: "It happens. There is nothing you can do about it. It's life."

The remarks were unusual in that he repeatedly referenced Navalny by his name for the first time in years — and that they came at a late-night news conference as results poured in from a presidential election that is certain to extend his rule.

Early returns showed him leading with over 87 per cent of the votes in a race with no competition, after years of ruthlessly suppressing the opposition and crippling independent media. Navalny's allies last month also said that talks with Russian and Western officials about a prisoner swap involving Navalny were underway. *—AP*

Navalny's allies had said that talks with Russian and Western officials about a prisoner swap were underway last month **PHOTO: X**

6 killed in roof collapse in Pak's Pakhtunkhwa

PESHAWAR, 18 MARCH

At least six persons of a family, including two children, were killed after the roof of their room collapsed in northwest Pakistan on Monday, officials said. The incident occurred in the Raghzai area in the South Waziristan tribal district of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. At least 10 persons were injured in the incident, and they have been shifted to the district headquarters hospital, police said, adding that the condition of those injured is stated to be critical. Chief Minister of the province, Ali Amin Gandapur, has expressed grief and sorrow over the death of six persons in a house collapse incident in Waziristan. He prayed for the early recovery of those injured and directed the district administration for the provision of early relief and assistance to the aggrieved family. *—PTI*

Oscar-winning King's Speech screenwriter dies

LONDON, 18 MARCH

David Seidler, best known for writing the Oscar-winning film The King's Speech, has died aged 86. The London-born screenwriter, who had a stammer, brought the true story of how King George VI overcame his speech impediment to the big screen. The 2010 film starred Colin Firth, who also won the best actor Bafta and Oscar for his depiction of the king. Seidler was also behind the stage adaptation of the film, which opened in the West End in 2012. He dedicated his 2011 Oscar to "all the stutterers around the world" - and at the time thanked the Queen for "not putting me in the Tower for using the F word". Seidler's manager Jeff Aghassi confirmed to BBC he passed away on Saturday. *—BBC News*

China FM holds talks with officials in NZ

WELLINGTON, 18 MARCH

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his New Zealand counterpart Monday, as China's most senior diplomat began a tour of the country and Australia.

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Winston Peters greeted Wang in Wellington, New Zealand's capital.

"There have been some significant developments since we last met, not least a global pandemic that impacted both our countries," Peters said in his opening comments of their formal meeting at New Zealand's parliament house.

"Today is a valuable opportunity to reflect on the challenges and opportunities that are now before us." Wang is the highest-ranking Chinese politician to visit the country since his own previous visit in 2017.

New Zealand has had strong economic ties with China in recent years, and was the first developed country to sign a bilateral free trade deal with Beijing in 2008.

While in Wellington, Wang will also have brief meetings with Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Trade Minister Todd McClay.

"China looks forward to working with the two countries to deliver on the common understandings between the leaders, enhance strategic communication, deepen mutual trust, advance exchanges and co-operation, promote the steady and sustained growth of the China-New Zealand and China-Australia comprehensive strategic partnerships and contribute to world peace, stability and prosperity," foreign ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said.

Wang will arrive in Canberra, Australia on Wednesday to meet with counterpart Penny Wong, with dialogue betweceen the pair expected to centre on the case of detained Australian Yang Hengjun. *—AP*

N Korea raising tensions with its rivals after military drills

SEOUL, 18 MARCH

North Korea fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters on Monday morning, its neighbours said, days after the end of the South Korean-US military drills that the North views as an invasion rehearsal.

The launches were North Korea's first known missile testing activities in about a month. Outside experts earlier predicted North Korea would extend its run of missile tests and intensify its warlike rhetoric ahead of the US presidential election in November to boost its leverage in future diplomacy.

Japan's Defence Ministry said North Korea fired three missiles, two together at 7:44 am and the other about 37 minutes later. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida told a parliamentary session that the North Korean missiles landed in the waters between the Korean Peninsula and Japan, all outside of Japan's exclusive economic zone, and that no damage or injuries have been reported.

North Korea fired multiple short-range ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters on Monday **PHOTO: N KOREA STATE MEDIA**

Kishida denounced North Korea's repeated ballistic missile tests as acts "that threaten the peace and safety of Japan, the region and the international society". He said Japan strongly protested against North Korea over its testing activities, saying they violated UN Security Council resolutions that ban the North from engaging in any ballistic activities.

South Korea's military said it also detected "several" suspected short-range ballistic launches by North Korea on Monday morning. The Joint Chiefs of Staff called the launches "clear provocation" that threaten peace on the Korean Peninsula. It said South Korea will maintain readiness to repel any provocation by North Korea, based on its solid military alliance with the United States.

According to Japan and South Korean assessments, the North Korean missiles fired from its capital region travelled a distance of 300-350 kilometres at the maximum speed of 50 kilometres per hour. *—AP*

Israel launches another raid on Gaza's main hospital

RAFAH, 18 MARCH

Israeli forces launched another raid on the Gaza Strip's largest hospital early Monday, saying Hamas militants had regrouped there and had fired on them from inside the compound, where Palestinian officials say tens of thousands of people were sheltering.

The army last raided Shifa Hospital in November after claiming that Hamas maintained an elaborate command centre within and beneath the facility. The military revealed a tunnel leading to a bunker, as well as weapons it said were found inside the hospital, but the evidence fell short of the earlier claims, and critics accused the army of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians.

People sheltering in the hospital said Israeli forces backed by tanks and artillery had surrounded the medical complex early Monday and that snipers were shooting at people inside. They said the army raided a number of buildings and detained dozens of people.

"We're trapped inside," said Abdel-Hady Sayed, who has been sheltering in the medical facility for over three months. "They fire at anything moving ... doctors and ambulances can't move."

Gaza's Health Ministry said the Israeli army was directing gun and missile fire at a building used for specialised surgeries. It said a fire broke out at the hospital's gate.

The ministry said around 30,000 people are sheltering at the hospital, including patients, medical staff and people who have fled their homes seeking safety.

Rear Administer Daniel Hagari, the chief Israeli military spokesperson, said the army launched a "high-precision operation" in parts of the medical complex. He said senior Hamas militants had regrouped there and were directing attacks from the compound. *—AP*

Pak to hurry up pvt project; assures IMF

ISLAMABAD, 18 MARCH

The Pakistan government has 'assured' the International Monetary Fund (IMF) of expediting the privatisation programme, reported ARY News, citing sources.

According to finance ministry sources, the privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) is proceeding as per the plan and efforts are underway to complete the process soon. They further said that the federal government has also prepared a plan to privatise power-sharing companies.

Moreover, the other loss-making state-owned enterprises, including First Women Bank, State Life Insurance, and Pakistan Engineering Company, are also on the list, ARY News reported. According to the sources, Pakistan is expected to sign the Staff-Level Agreement with the IMF next week.

The signing of the staff-level agreement with the IMF will clear the way for Pakistan to receive the last tranche of USD 1.1 billion under the SBA Agreement, the sources added. They further stated that during the talks with the IMF, Pakistan's officials assured the international lender of jacking up the electricity tariff from 1 July, while monthly, quarterly and yearly fuel adjustments will hit consumers for cost recovery, according to ARY News. *—ANI*

8 PEOPLE KILLED

Pak conducts airstrikes inside Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD/KABUL, 18 MARCH

Pakistan on Monday carried out airstrikes inside Afghanistan that killed eight civilians, including three children, Afghan Taliban said, amidst a war of words between the two neighbours for a spate of recent militant attacks in restive Pakistani cities.

A senior Afghan interim government official on Monday confirmed that strikes in the Afghanistan provinces of Paktika and Khost along the Pakistan border have taken place. There was no immediate reaction from the Pakistani side.

Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesperson of the Afghan rulers, alleged in a statement that Pakistani aircraft had carried out the airstrikes, the Dawn newspaper reported from Kabul.

At "around 3 am, Pakistani aircraft bombarded civilian homes" in Khost and Paktika provinces near the border with Pakistan, said Afghan interim government spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, claiming that all eight people killed were women and children.

Mujahid said that Pakistani planes had bombed the Laman area in Paktika's Barmal district.

Alleging that "houses of common people were targeted", he said three women and three children were killed in Paktika and a house collapsed while two women were killed in Khost, where a house was destroyed as well.

Goverment spokesperson said that Pakistani planes had bombed the Laman area in Paktika's Barmal district **PHOTO: X**

"The Islamic Emirate strongly condemns the attacks and describes these as non-serious actions and violation of Afghanistani territory," Mujahid said.

The spokesperson asked Pakistan to stop blaming Afghanistan for its problems and failure to control violent incidents. "Such acts can lead to dire consequences which will not be in control of Pakistan," he warned.

Offering the funeral prayers of the two officers, Zardari on Sunday said that the blood of the martyrs would not go in vain and the country would avenge the deaths.

The president said Pakistan would not hesitate to strike back if attacked by anyone at borders or inside its territory.

Pakistan's Special Representative to Afghanistan Ambassador Asif Durrani on Saturday said that an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 militants from the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have taken shelter in neighbouring Afghanistan. *—PTI*

Rupee falls 4 paise to settle at 82.90 against dollar

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

The rupee declined by 4 paise to settle at 82.90 (provisional) against the US currency on Monday on firm crude oil prices. Gains in domestic stock markets and foreign fund inflows capped the rupee's losses, analysts said. The local unit opened firm at 82.84 to a dollar at the interbank foreign exchange market and inched up to the day's high of 82.83 in early deals. However, the rupee gave up early gains as the US dollar and bond yields remained at higher levels ahead of the Federal Reserve's meeting this week. The rupee dropped to a low of 82.91 before settling at 82.90, down by 4 paise over the previous close. On Friday, the rupee had settled at 82.86. The US dollar index, which measures the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was almost flat at 103.40. Brent Crude, the global oil benchmark, gained nearly 1 per cent to trade above the USD 86-level in global markets. *—PTI*

Gold falls to ₹66,140 for 10 per grams

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Gold price marginally fell Rs 10 to Rs 66,140 per 10 grams in the national capital on Monday, according to HDFC Securities. The precious metal had closed at Rs 66,150 per 10 grams in the previous trade. Silver also declined Rs 100 to Rs 77,000 per kg. "Spot gold prices (24 carats) in the Delhi markets trading at Rs 66,140 per 10 grams, down Rs 10 from the previous close," Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst at HDFC Securities, said. In the international markets, spot gold at Comex was trading at USD 2,156 per ounce, unchanged from its previous close. Silver was also quoting lower at USD 25.11 per ounce. In the previous trade, it had settled at USD 25.19 per ounce. "Gold prices are down on continued profit-booking/long liquidation as traders position themselves ahead of the two key central bank's policy outcomes, starting with the Bank of Japan on Tuesday and the US Federal Reserve on Wednesday. *—PTI*

FLY91 starts flights ops between 4 cities

PANAJI, 18 MARCH

FLY91, the latest entrant in the country's aviation sector, on Monday commenced commercial operations with its first flight taking off for Bengaluru from here. The flight departed from Goa's Manohar International Airport at 07.55 am to Kempegowda International Airport, Bengaluru. The regional airline also operated its maiden flight to Sindhudurg from Bengaluru on Monday, a company spokesman said. The airline also launched a special fare of Rs 1,991 (all inclusive). TCommenting on the start of commercial operations, Manoj Chacko, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of FLY91 said the launch of commercial flight symbolises the airline's "commitment to connecting India in a way that has never been done before". *—PTI*

IndiGo starts flights from B'luru to Lakshadweep

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

IndiGo on Monday announced a direct flight between Bengaluru and Agatti starting from 31 March, enhancing air connectivity to Lakshadweep. Agatti will be the 88th domestic and 121st overall destination in the IndiGo network. The services between Bengaluru and Agatti will commence from 31 March, the airline said in a release.The airline will be using ATR aircraft, having around 78 seats, on the route. IndiGo said Agatti is popular amongst those looking for a bit of deep-sea fishing, scuba diving, sailing, skiing and even kayaking. Currently, only Alliance Air has services to Agatti while regional carrier FLY91 plans to start services to the destination in April. *—PTI*

Mkts settle higher in volatile trade; metal shares shine

BSE Sensex settles higher by 104.99 points or 0.14 per cent at 72,748.42

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty closed higher in a highly volatile trade on Monday as investors turned cautious ahead of the US Federal Reserve interest rate decision.

After gyrating between gains and losses, the 30-share BSE Sensex settled higher by 104.99 points or 0.14 per cent at 72,748.42. As many as 14 Sensex shares closed in the green while 16 in the red. The index moved between a high of 72,985.89 and a low of 72,314.16.

The broader Nifty of the NSE rose by 32.35 points or 0.15 per cent, to close at 22,055.70 as 21 of its components advanced and 29 declined.

The gains were primarily led by metal, auto and commodity shares while IT and Teck shares capped the upside.

Nifty rises by 32.35 points or 0.15 per cent *PHOTO: PTI*

Reliance Industries which rebounded more than 1.5 per cent from the day's low was the major contributor to Sensex and Nifty gains. RIL settled higher by 1.45 per cent.

Tata Steel rose the most by 5 per cent among Sensex shares. Mahindra & Mahindra, JSW Steel, Tata Motors, Axis Bank, Sun Pharma, Reliance Industries and Maruti were the other biggest gainers.IT shares on the other hand declined amid concerns over interest rates in the US market. Infosys fell the most by 1.99 per cent among Sensex shares. Tata Consultancy Services, Titan, Wipro, Hindustan Unilever and Nestle also declined.

"The Indian market followed the positive Asian peers with a mixed bias. Domestic issues, like mutual fund stress tests, hardly brought any negative views, but premium valuation remains as a concern. Midcap & small caps are attempting to scroll up, however consolidation persists," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services.

The US Federal Open Market Committee meeting will commence on March 19 and the policy rate decision will be announced on Wednesday.

In the broader market, the BSE midcap gauge climbed 0.04 per cent while the smallcap index dipped 0.07 per cent.

However, IT, consumer durables, teck, services and financial services were the laggards.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Hong Kong settled higher. European markets were quoting in the green. The US markets ended lower on Friday.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) bought equities worth Rs 848.56 crore on Friday, according to exchange data.

Global oil benchmark Brent crude climbed 0.87 per cent to USD 86.08 a barrel. *—PTI*

PAYTM'S BIZ 'INTACT'

YES Securities gives 'buy' call for Paytm

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

In an endorsement of One97 Communications Limited (OCL), which operates popular fintech firm Paytm, YES Securities has upgraded its rating from 'sell' to 'buy' for the first time since the commencement of its coverage.

This upgrade reflects the brokerage firm's confidence in Paytm's strategic positioning and its ability to navigate the evolving digital payments landscape successfully.

According to YES Securities, the fintech company's dependence on the wallet business for revenue had already declined materially to only about one-sixth of Payments revenue.

"The Wallet business, integral to Paytm Payments Bank (PPBL), is positioned to witness a decline in revenue contribution to near negligible levels. However, this adjustment is not anticipated to heavily impact OCL's financial trajectory, given the wallet's already reduced share in the company's revenue makeup--highlighting OCL's strategic foresight in diversifying its revenue sources," said the brokerage house.As recently as last week, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) has granted OCL the approval to participate in UPI as a Third-Party Application Provider (TPAP) within the multi-bank model.This development will ensure the continuity of Paytm's UPI business, effectively mitigating potential disruptions.

"Under the multi-bank model, OCL has tied up with AXSB, HDFCB, SBI, and YES, ensuring no disruption to the UPI business," YES Securities noted, underscoring the importance of this approval in maintaining Paytm's competitive edge in the digital payments space.

In light of initial uncertainties, OCL's proactive communication efforts have been geared towards minimizing client loss and recapturing those who may have explored alternatives.

This approach is deemed effective in sustaining Paytm's client base, with YES Securities observing a manageable decline in UPI transaction value, indicating a potential for recovery and growth.Despite temporary setbacks in loan distribution due to regulatory considerations, YES Securities said it anticipates a supportive growth trajectory facilitated by new partner additions. This optimistic outlook is further buoyed by Paytm's historical dominance in the Wallet and Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL) markets, showcasing the company's inherent competitive DNA and innovation-driven ethos. *—ANI*

PHOTO: ANI

- According to YES Securities, the fintech company's dependence on the wallet business for revenue had already declined materially to only about one-sixth of Payments revenue

OVERSEAS CAPITAL FLOW

Insurance firms received ₹53K cr FDI since Dec 2014

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

PHOTO: ANI

The insurance sector has witnessed an influx of Rs 53,900 crore in foreign direct investment (FDI) from December 2014 to January 2024, Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi has said.

This comes against the backdrop of the liberalisation of overseas capital flow norms by the government.

The government increased the permissible FDI limit from 26 per cent in 2014 to 49 per cent in 2015 and then to 74 per cent in 2021, he told ANI.

However, Joshi informed, the permissible FDI limit for insurance intermediaries was increased to 100 per cent in 2019.

"As a result, Rs 53,900 crore of FDI was received in the insurance companies between December 2014 and January 2024," he said.

The IRDAI (Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) opened up the market in August 2000 with the invitation for application for registration. Foreign companies were allowed ownership of up to 26 per cent.

Since then, several insurance companies in India have attracted foreign direct investment (FDI) to bolster their operations. Private life insurance companies like HDFC Life, ICICI Prudential Life, Max Life, and others have attracted significant FDI over the years.

These companies have established partnerships with foreign insurers, leading to substantial capital infusion.

Informing further about the impact of reforms in the Insurance sector, Joshi said that the Assets Under Management (AUM) nearly tripled to Rs 60.04 lakh crore as on March 31, 2023 as compared to Rs 21.07 lakh crore in 2013-14, while total insurance premium recorded more than two-fold jump to Rs 10.4 lakh crore from Rs 3.94 lakh crore at the end of March 14.

Meanwhile, insurance penetration increased from 3.9 per cent in 2013-14 to 4 per cent in 2022-23. *—PTI*

Deep tech startup policy in final stages of discussion: DPIIT

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Speaking at StartUp Mahakumbh, Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh said startups need to convert their innovation into intellectual property rights for the benefit of the nation and themselves.

"Extensive R&D is the answer for that and Government of India is in process of creating a separate dedicated deep tech startup policy. The policy paper is now in the final stages of inter-ministerial discussion. We hope to bring it forward soon. We will move towards creating funds of funds. Hopefully you will see separate window for deeptech startups," Singh said. Prime Minister's Science, Technology, and Innovation Advisory Council , on 7 July, 2022 had recommended the creation of a national consortium and a working group to propose a comprehensive policy framework to address the needs and strengthen the Indian deeptech startup ecosystem.Singh said that the provision of Rs 1 lakh crore for research and development in the interim Budget is a path breaking exercise.

Rajesh Singh *PHOTO: ANI*

He called for implementing the defence ministry 's iDex model across government departments."I think they have reached about Rs 22,000 crore of procurements from startups so far but I don't know how many of them are innovative that can benefit the country in the long run in bringing about innovation-led economy ," Singh said. *—PTI*

GENSOL SETS UP 160 MW SOLAR PROJECT IN GUJ AT ₹128CR

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Gensol Engineering Limited has completed the process of setting up a 160-megawatt solar power project at Bhavnagar in Gujarat at a cost of Rs 128 crore. The ground-mounted solar project for Continuum Green Energy has been set up on an engineering, procurement, and construction (EPC) basis.

Gensol Engineering said that the project will contribute significantly to the company's increasing solar EPC project portfolio. With this, its EPC order book has exceeded Rs 1,000 crore. *—PTI*

NexGen Energia to invest ₹1K cr for setting up EV unit in J&K

NOIDA, 18 MARCH

Sustainable energy solutions firm NexGen Energia on Monday said it will invest Rs 1,000 crore in setting up a manufacturing unit for electric vehicles (EVs) in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Noida-based company said it is currently in talks with the authorities in the Union Territory and scouting for 100-acre land either in the Kathua industrial area or in the Kashmir Valley.The move comes soon after the company announced Rs 3,000 crore investment for setting up a Compress Bio Gas (CBG) plant in Gujarat.

"Along with 'Make in India', we are on the way to fulfil the dream of self-reliant India. We will establish an EV plant in Jammu and Kashmir in collaboration with the government in which we will invest Rs 1,000 crore," NexGen Energia chairman Piyush Dwivedi said."The manufacturing unit will provide direct and indirect employment to about 1 lakh people and we aim to launch NGE's most affordable electric two-wheeler on 15 April next month for just Rs 36,900 from our Noida unit," Dwivedi said.The NexGen Energia Chairman said last week he met with Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari at his Delhi office where the company presented its proposals on sustainable energy solutions like increasing the use of CBG and India-made EVs. *—PTI*

The move comes soon after the company announced Rs 3,000 crore investment for setting up a plant in Gujarat *PHOTO: ANI*

PHOTO: ANI

3 CANCER DRUGS FROM UKRAINE GETS MARKETING NOD

CHANDIGARH, 18 MARCH

Pharma major Venus Remedies on Monday said it has expanded the reach of its oncology drugs in the Asia Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region with marketing authorisations from Ukraine for three cancer drugs-- paclitaxel, oxaliplatin and irinotecan.

Saransh Chaudhary, President, Global Critical Care, Venus Remedies, said, "These marketing approvals mark a significant milestone in our global expansion strategy. We are looking forward to introducing the entire range of our oncology products in Ukraine in due course, thereby contributing to the advancement of healthcare and making a positive impact on people's lives."With over two decades of presence in the Ukrainian market, the company has 57 product registrations in Ukraine.

"This achievement has further strengthened our position in the international pharmaceutical market. It also exemplifies our dedication to advancing healthcare solutions for diverse populations," said Aditi K Chaudhary, President, International Business, Venus Remedies.

Its total volume of exports to Ukraine stands at USD 2.20 million. By strengthening its product portfolio in Ukraine, the company aims to increase this figure by 20 per cent in the next one year, a company statement said. *—PTI*

- The three cancer drugs are that got authorisations from Ukraine are: paclitaxel, oxaliplatin and irinotecan

AUSTRALIAN SUIT

Uber pays $178 M to end legal fight with taxi drivers

CALIFORNIA, 18 MARCH

Global rideshare giant Uber will pay 272 million Australian dollars (USD 178 million) to settle a long-running dispute with Australian taxi and hire car drivers who lost out when the company entered the Australian market.

A class action against Uber had been expected to go to trial in the Supreme Court of Victoria on Monday, but Maurice Blackburn Lawyers representing 8,000 taxi and hire car drivers said the case will be dropped because Uber agreed to the financial settlement.

Maurice Blackburn principal lawyer Michael Donelly said that drivers and car owners suffered financial losses due to Uber's aggressive entry into the market in 2012 and that the company consistently attempted to avoid compensating them.

"On the courtroom steps and after years of refusing to do the right thing by those we say they harmed, Uber has blinked, and thousands of everyday Australians joined together to stare down a global giant," he said.

It is the fifth-largest class action settlement in Australia's history and comes five years after the action *PHOTO: ANI*

An Uber statement described the complaints of the taxi industry as "legacy issues" and said rideshare regulations did not exist anywhere in the world when the company started more than a decade ago.

"The rise of ridesharing has grown Australia's overall point-to-point transport industry, bringing with it greater choice and improved experiences for consumers, as well as new earnings opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Australian workers," the statement said.

"Since 2018, Uber has made significant contributions into various state-level taxi compensation schemes, and with today's proposed settlement, we put these legacy issues firmly in our past."

It's the fifth-largest class action settlement in Australia's history and comes five years after the action. *—PTI*

"Indian startups on track to raise USD 8B to 12B this year'

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Indian startups are expected to raise USD 8-12 billion this year, a top official of venture capital firm Peak XV said on Monday, highlighting that the country's startup ecosystem is the most vibrant in the world.

Speaking at StartUp Mahakumbh, Peak XV Managing Director Rajan Anandan said around USD 20 billion of private capital is lying uninvested and is committed for investment in private firms and startups in India.

Anandan said that the investment run rate in Indian startups before 2021 and 2022, was about USD 8-10 billion, which increased to USD 60 billion in 2021 and 2022 combined.

"Last year, it was USD 7 billion, which people said is low. It could have been zero because basically six years of funding came in two years.This year we are well on track to USD 8-10 or 12 billion. We are going to have an ecosystem which is going to have USD 10-12 billion for few years and it will go at natural pace that it should," Anandan said.

He said that USD 10 billion or about Rs 80,000 crore funding per year is enough to build the Indian startup ecosystem.

Citing shift in focus of funding in the US to AI and next generation software entities, Anandan said the Indian startup ecosystem is the most vibrant ecosystem in the world.

He said that his firm last year made investments in consumer businesses which are no longer getting funded in the US.

"India today has 20 startups that are being publicly traded. We think that over the next 7-8 years, there will be 100 startups that will go public," Anandan said.

He indicated that growth in funding is coming back across funding stages. *—PTI*

Anandan indicated that growth in funding is coming back across funding stages *PHOTO:ANI*

KNOW YOUR TEAM

MUMBAI INDIANS

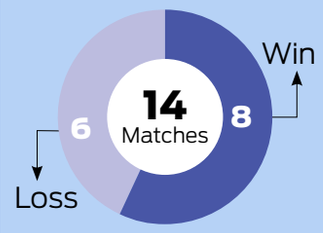
MI, known as one of the most successful teams in IPL history, has managed to win five titles so far. With the comeback of Hardik Pandya, the team can expect a renewed vision

AKASH MADHWAL
Key Bowler

8 Innings (Innings)	14 Wkts (Wickets)	15.64 Eco (Economy)
5/5 BBI (Best Bowling in innings)	1 4W (Wickets)	

STRENGTHS
MI possess an exceptional bowling attack with bowlers like Bumrah, Coetzee, Behrendorff, and Madhushanka. Pandya's addition in middle-order will give an extra boost

2023 IPL RECORDS



WEAKNESS
Fans have to wait to watch how the team performs under Pandya. Lack of wicket-taking spinners are also a major concern

ROHIT SHARMA
Key Batsman

20.75 Avg (Average)	65 HS (Highest Score)	16 Innings (Innings)
132.80 SR (Strike Rate)	35 4s (Fours)	17 6s (sixes)

SQUAD

Squad: Hardik Pandya(C), Rohit Sharma, Akash Madhwal, Anush Kamboj, Arjun Tendulkar, Dewald Brewis, Dilshan Madushanka, Gerald Coetzee, Ishan Kishan, Jason Behrendorff, Jasprit Bumrah, Kumar Kartikeya, Mohammad Nabi, Naman Dhir, Nehal Wadhera, Nuwan Thushara, Piyush Chawla, Romario Shepherd, Shams Mulani, Shivalik Sharma, Shreyas Gopal, Suryakumar Yadav, Tilak Varma, Tim David, and Vishnu Vinod

SCHEDULE

24 March vs GT	27 March vs SRH	1 April vs RR	7 April vs DC
Ahmedabad	Hyderabad	Mumbai	Mumbai

PHOTO: X

King Kohli joins RCB training camp

BENGALURU, 18 MARCH

Superstar Virat Kohli on Monday made his first appearance in the training session of his franchise Royal Challengers Bangalore ahead of the IPL beginning 22 March. Kohli, who was out of the country for the birth of his second child, arrived in India on Sunday. The former India and RCB captain was seen taking rounds of the Chinnaswamy Stadium as part of his warm-up. Skipper Faf du Plessis also attended the session. RCB, who have never won the IPL, begin their campaign against reigning champions Chennai Super Kings in Chennai on Friday. Kohli's performance in the lucrative T20 league will be closely tracked as the event precedes the T20 World Cup in the USA and Caribbean. *—PTI*

MI name Wood as replacement for injured Behrendorff

MUMBAI, 18 MARCH

Five-time champions Mumbai Indians on Monday named England left-arm fast bowler Luke Wood as injured Australian Jason Behrendorff's replacement for the upcoming edition of the Indian Premier League. According to a statement from IPL, Wood will join MI for Rs 50 lakh. "Mumbai Indians (MI) name Luke Wood as a replacement for the injured Jason Behrendorff for the upcoming TATA Indian Premier League (IPL) 2024," the IPL said in a statement. Wood has played five T20Is for England, in addition to two ODIs, and has eight T20I wickets against his name. MI bowlers Dilshan Madushanka and Gerald Coetzee are also facing serious issues ahead of their first game against Gujarat Titans on 24 March. *—PTI*

Modi lauds teen badminton player Tanvi Sharma

HOSHIARPUR, 18 MARCH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has commended 15-year-old badminton player Tanvi Sharma, who hails from Punjab, for her stellar performances at the national and international levels throughout Badminton Championships of 2023. Sharma has captured the attention of the nation by clinching a gold medal at the Senior Asian Championship held in Malaysia. In a letter to the badminton player, Modi, on behalf of the entire nation, extended his heartfelt congratulations to the young athlete, recognising her outstanding achievement on the international stage. Modi emphasised the inspirational role Tanvi plays for the younger generation, noting that her success will undoubtedly motivate countless aspiring athletes across the country. While sharing her feelings upon receiving the letter from Modi, she expressed her immense pride and happiness, stating that the letter has filled her with a sense of honour and accomplishment. Tanvi described the letter as a symbol of recognition for her hard work and dedication to badminton, and she vowed to continue striving for excellence in the sport. *—PTI*

IOA dissolves ad-hoc panel for wrestling

IOA said that the panel has collaborated with WFI

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

The Indian Olympic Association on Monday dissolved the ad-hoc committee for wrestling, saying "there is no further need" for it to continue after revocation of the suspension on the national federation, which now gets complete administrative control of the sport.

The IOA said that the decision was also guided by the successful conduct of the selection trials for next month's Olympic qualifying tournament for which the panel collaborated with the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI).

The ad-hoc committee was formed in December last year after the sports ministry suspended the WFI, which got a shot in the arm when the suspension imposed on it by the global governing body -- United World Wrestling -- was lifted in February.

IOA said that the decision was also guided by conduct of selection trials for next month's Olympic qualifying event ***PHOTO: PTI***

"The decision to dissolve the Adhoc Committee comes in light of the lifting of the ban on the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) by the United World Wrestling (UWW) and the successful completion of Selection Trials by the Adhoc Committee appointed by the IOA as per the directives of the Hon'ble High Court of Delhi," said the IOA order issued on 10 March.

WFI chief Sanjay Singh thanked the Indian Olympic Association for giving his elected panel control of the national federation.

"We thank IOA for giving us full-fledged control of the WFI. We will give all facilities to the wrestlers. We will soon organise a national camp and if the wrestlers want to train abroad we will facilitate that as well. The focus is now on the Olympics. We are hoping that 5-6 wrestlers will qualify," Singh told PTI.

The three-member committee, under the chairmanship of Bhupender Singh Bajwa was constituted on 23 December after the newly-elected WFI, led by Sanjay Singh, had allegedly flouted its own rules.

The IOA instructed WFI to appoint a "Safeguarding Committee" to address concerns of sexual harassment and other issues such as adherence to rules. The order also instructed the WFI to "repay the loan" provided by the IOA to the ad-hoc panel for managing wrestling affairs when the national body was under suspension. *—PTI*

Rigorous Barca routs Atletico 3-0

MADRID, 18 MARCH

Atletico Madrid fans burned a João Félix jersey before their team's match against Barcelona. They also vandalized a plaque with his name and insulted the player outside the Metropolitano Stadium.

But when the match started, the Portugal forward answered those fans on the field. Félix struck against his former club again on Sunday, scoring the opening goal in Barcelona's 3-0 win over Atletico Madrid in the Spanish league.

Robert Lewandowski and Fermín López also scored for Barcelona, which moved to second place with its fifth straight league victory over Atletico. Félix had scored the winner in the Catalan club's 1-0 win in the league in December. The Portugal international is playing on loan from Atletico after falling out with the club last season.

Félix was loudly jeered by the Atletico fans at the Metropolitano Stadium when he was replaced in the 77th. The forward arrived at Atletico for 120 million euros (now $130 million) in 2019 but never fully met the high expectations that came with his signing.

Barcelona players celebrate after scoring goals against Atlético de Madrid in Civitas Metropolitan Stadium, Madrid ***PHOTO: X/FCB***

- Robert Lewandowski and Fermín López also scored for Barcelona, which moved to second place with its fifth straight league victory over Atletico. Félix had scored the winner in the Catalan club's 1-0 win in the league in December

Félix opened the scoring from the middle of the area after a pass by Lewandowski in the 38th minute, becoming the first Barcelona player to score in both matches against Atletico in a single league season since Lionel Messi in 2019-20. Lewandowski added to the lead in a breakaway after Atletico midfielder Rodrigo De Paul gave away possession with a bad pass early in the second half, and the Poland striker set up López's header for Barcelona's third goal in the 65th.

Atletico defender Nahuel Molina was sent off in stoppage time for a foul on Vitor Roque to stop a breakaway. Xavi was sent off before halftime for protesting. *—AP*

BNP PARIBAS OPEN

Alcaraz demolishes Medvedev

CALIFORNIA, 18 MARCH

Carlos Alcaraz successfully defended his Indian Wells crown with a 7-6(5) 6-1 win over Daniil Medvedev in the final on Sunday.

Alcaraz successfully defended his Indian Wells crown with a 7-6(5) 6-1 win over Daniil Medvedev in the final on Sunday. In a rematch of last year's final, Alcaraz started sloppily, spraying errors around the court to fall 3-0 down but raised his level and captured the first set when his Russian opponent's forehand went wide in the tiebreak.

The Spaniard romped through the second set, raising his arms in the air and letting out a roar when Medvedev missed another forehand wide on match point. Second seed Alcaraz smacked 25 winners to Medvedev's 11 and was especially effective against his opponent's second serves.

It was an eventful stay in the California desert for the 20 year old Carlos Alcaraz ***PHOTO: X/ ATP WORLD TOUR***

> **I enjoy playing these kind of matches with Medvedev. Hopefully more finals ahead**
>
> -Carlos Alcaraz, Winner

"I enjoy playing these kind of matches with you," Alcaraz told Medvedev during the trophy ceremony. "Hopefully more finals ahead." It was an eventful stay in the California desert for the 20-year-old Alcaraz.

The two-time major champion was stung on the forehead when a swarm of bees invaded the court on Thursday, kept his number two ranking by ending Jannik Sinner's 19-match winning streak in the semis and slayed the big-serving fourth seed Medvedev in the final. *—AP*

Swiatek beats Sakkari

CALIFORNIA, 18 MARCH

Poland's Iga Swiatek claimed another dominant win over Maria Sakkari to clinch her second Indian Wells title.

In a repeat of the 2022 final, the world number one produced an almost identical score, beating Greece's Sakkari 6-4 6-0 in 69 minutes. That secured a 19th career title for Swiatek, 22, and a second of the year having also won in Qatar last month.

"It's an amazing thing to be standing here again," she said. "Thank you for really making this feel like home." Sakkari, 28, was playing in her 10th WTA final and hoped for her third title, but Swiatek charged into a 3-0 lead in California.

This is Iga Swiatek's second Indian wells title and eighth WTA 1000 tikes ***PHOTO: X/WTA***

The world number nine broke back, but had to save two break points at 5-4, before Swiatek hit a forehand winner to clinch the first set.

The four-time Grand Slam champion then breezed through the second set in just 25 minutes, with Sakkari winning just five points.

"I'm sorry I couldn't put up a better fight," said Sakkari during the trophy presentation. "It was pretty quick for you guys but credit to Iga. *—BBC News*

MIZORAM STUN HOCKEY PUNJAB TO SEAL QF BERTH

PUNE, 18 MARCH

Hockey Mizoram stunned Hockey Punjab 4-2 to secure a quarterfinal spot in the 14th Hockey India Senior Women National Championship 2024 on Monday.

The win enabled Hockey Mizoram to top Pool F with three wins from as many games ahead of Hockey Punjab, Hockey Himachal and Hockey Rajasthan. Lalrinpuii (6th, 9th minutes) struck a brace, while skipper H Lalruatfeli (26th) and Marina Lalramnghaki (54th) converted two penalty corners for the winning side.

Hockey Punjab's goals came from the sticks of Taranpreet Kaur (35th) and Rajwinder Kaur (51st), both from penalty corners. Hockey Maharashtra's opponent in the quarterfinal will be decided on Tuesday as they will take on the winners of Pool G.

In other matches on Monday, Assam Hockey beat Le Puducherry Hockey 2-1 in an inconsequential Pool D tie. *—PTI*

SWISS OPEN

Lakshya, Sindhu spearhead India's challenge

BASEL, 18 MARCH

Star Indian shuttler Lakshya Sen is expected to continue his purple patch, while two-time Olympic medallist PV Sindhu will strive to regain top form at the Swiss Open Super 300 tournament, beginning on Tuesday.

After first-round losses at the Malaysia Super 1000 and India Super 750 earlier in the year, Sen has gained momentum. The 22-year-old enters the USD 210,000 tournament on the back of semifinal appearances at the French Open and All England Championships.

Former world No 1 Kidambi Srikanth will face Asian Games bronze medallist Wang Tzu-wei of Chinese Taipei in the first round while young Priyanshu Rajawat will take on Hong Kong's fourth seed Lee Cheuk Yiu. After making headway in the French Open earlier this month, Sindhu, who is on a comeback trail after recovering from a left knee injury, made an early exit from the All England Championship.

The fourth-seeded Indian will once again meet Germany's Yvonne Li, who retired against Sindhu in All England Championship opener last week.

She will face a tough customer in Busanan Ongbamrungphan in the quarterfinals and if she manages to tame the Thai shuttler, Sindhu is likely to face in-form reigning All England champion and nemesis Carolina Marin of Spain. The sixth-seeded pair of Ashwini Ponnappa and Tanisha Crasto, who have been in good touch, will cross swords with the Indonesian combination of Meilysa Trias Puspitasari and Rachel Allessya Rose.

Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who have been seeded eighth, will have to fight it out against the American duo of Annie Xu and Kerry Xu. *—PTI*

SPEED MEETS BEAUTY

Formula-4 car racing was held for the first time in Kahsmir. The sleek racing cars raced along the famous Dal lake, creating a thrilling atmosphere ***PHOTO: AP***

Akhil Sheoran and Anish Bhanwala ***PHOTO: PTI***

India bag six medals at Polish Grand Prix

NEW DELHI, 18 MARCH

Paris Olympics quota winners Akhil Sheoran and Anish Bhanwala won a gold medal each as Indian shooters ended their Polish Grand Prix campaign with six medals.

Sheoran won gold in the men's 50m rifle 3-positions Match 2 with a record score of 468.4. Patrik Jany of the Czech Republic was 2.2 points behind at second spot at the Grand Prix Wroclawia & Dolnego Slaska. Both the scores were higher than the existing world record of 466.1, held by Jany's countryman Jiri Privratsky.

Bhanwala won gold in the men's 25m rapid-fire pistol at the Jozef Zapedzki Grand Prix held simultaneously. Some members of India's 50m rifle and 25m rapid-fire pistol squad are currently on an exposure tour to Europe to compete in various established international events in the build-up to the Paris Olympics.

Navy shooter Niraj Kumar was also impressive, finishing with two bronze in both the men's rifle 3P matches, becoming the only Indian to finish with two medals. Niraj also shot impressive scores of 595 and 594 in the two qualification matches.

In the first match, he finished third behind Jany and Rio Olympic silver medallist Serhiy Kulish of Ukraine. Swapnil Kusale also shot a solid 595 in Match 2 to top the qualification standings, being more accurate than Niraj, but finished fourth overall.

The two Grands Prix also saw another Paris quota winner Shriyanka Sadangi win bronze in the women's 3P and Ashi Chouksey pick up a silver in the second women's 3P. The Indian shooting contingent will now move to Germany for the ISAS Dortmund which begins on Tuesday. *—PTI*